

SYUICHI TSUKISHIMA

Illustration by **MOKYU**

I KEPT PRESSING
THE

100-
MILLION-YEAR
BUTTON AND CAME OUT ON TOP

~ THE UNBEATABLE REJECT SWORDSMAN ~

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YEN
ON
New York

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ON TOP: ~THE UNBEATABLE REJECT SWORDSMAN~
SYUICHI TSUKISHIMA

Translation by Luke Hutton
Cover art by Mokyuu

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1 OKUNEN BUTTON O RENDA SHITA ORE HA, KIZUITARA SAIKYO
NI NATTE ITA Vol.1 ~RAKUDAI KENSHI NO GAKUIN MUSO~
©Syuichi Tsukishima, Mokyuu 2019

First published in Japan in 2019 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION,
Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: November 2021

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Tsukishima, Syuichi, author. | Mokyū, illustrator. | Hutton, Luke, translator.

Title: I kept pressing the 100-million-year button and came out on top / Syuichi

Tsukishima ; illustration by Mokyū ; translation by Luke Hutton.

Other titles: Ichiokunen button o renda shita ore wa, kizuitara saikyo ni natte ita. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2021–

Identifiers: LCCN 2021034588 | ISBN 9781975322342 (v. 1 ; trade paperback)

Subjects: LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PL876.S857 I3413 2021 | DDC 895.6/36—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021034588>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-2234-2 (paperback)
978-1-9753-2235-9 (ebook)

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CHAPTER 1

The 100-Million-Year Button & the World of Time

My name was Allen Rodol, and I was fifteen years old.

I had absolutely zero talent with the sword. I was so incompetent and unskilled with the weapon that even I had to acknowledge my own feebleness. Despite that, I still spent day after day frantically swinging my blade. I practiced longer and harder than any of my peers.

“Hard work will always bear fruit”—that was what my mom always told me.

She’d raised me as a single mother. My dad had died from an epidemic when I was still a baby. I was told he was a faithful and honest man, but I didn’t even remember his face. Since I had no memories of him, I didn’t really feel much for him. I’d gotten my jet-black hair from my mom, while my piercing eyes apparently resembled my dad’s.

I had few memories of when I was little, but I did clearly recall Mom grinding herself into dust every single day to support me. She’d scrimped and saved for years with her meager salary to pay for my enrollment and tuition fees at Grand Swordcraft Academy, which I was currently attending.

That was why no matter how much I was ridiculed as the “Reject Swordsman,” no matter how much my classmates bullied me, no matter how much of a nuisance my teachers thought I was...no matter how hard my days here were, I was never going to slack on my training.

If I practiced ten times harder than anyone else, I was sure to become a great swordsman eventually. One day, I would be able to pay Mom back and grant her an easy life. That goal drove me to give

my all at the academy. And yet all my hard work was going to go up in smoke in just one day.

It was all because of what happened that evening.

I was swinging my sword in the schoolyard as per usual when a classmate approached me, with two girls following behind him.

His name was Dodriel, eldest son of House Barton, a barony. His trademark blue hair was done up in a ponytail, and he stood at about the same height as me at 165 centimeters. He was a handsome boy and always had girls following him around. Most importantly, he was exceptionally talented with the sword—a prodigy, if you will.

I hated him with all my guts. He bullied me relentlessly and called me the “Reject Swordsman” to belittle me. Normally, I ignored his snide comments by pretending not to hear him.

This time, however, he said something I couldn’t let him get away with.

“Take back...what you just said...!”

“Whoa there, buddy, no need to get so angry. All I did was speak the truth. Trash children must come from trash parents... Do you find any fault with that statement?”

“How dare you, Dodriel!”

I lost my temper and grabbed his collar.

“Tch... Get those filthy hands off me, Reject Swordsman scum!” Dodriel yelled, clicking his tongue and kicking my stomach with incredible speed.

“Hargh?! ”

The kick had enough force to put a grown man to shame and sent me flying backward. When I crashed onto my butt, the girls behind him giggled with delight.

“You may be right about me being talentless garbage...but I won’t let you speak about my mom that way!” I fired back, pointing a finger at him.

He shrugged and sighed.

“Haaah...you know what they say, right? The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Conventional wisdom dictates that parents of garbage must be garbage themselves.”

Though he was insulting me, he made it sound as if he were sympathizing from the bottom of his heart.

“Y-you bastard!”

His incessant provocations finally sending me over the edge, I pointed my sword toward Dodriel in rage. He paid me no mind and continued to speak nonchalantly.

“Hey now, do you really want to do that? Surely, you know it’s against the rules.”

“Grrr...”

According to school regulations, personal sword fights between students were forbidden. Breaking that rule could lead to repercussions as harsh as suspension or expulsion. Given my position as the lowest ranked student at the academy...there was no doubt I would be expelled if I started an altercation.

"No, I won't fight you here. I instead challenge you to a duel, Dodriel Barton!"

"Now this is surprising... The Reject Swordsman is challenging the top student in the academy to a duel?"

"That's right! If I win, you'll take back what you said!"

"Ha! How amusing... I grant you your duel, Allen! I also accept your condition. If you win, I'll eat my words! I'll even bow my head in apology if you so please! However, if you lose—"

He paused, curling the corners of his lips into a wicked grin.

"...If I lose?" I pressed him to continue.

"Yes, that will do... If you lose, you will withdraw from the academy on the spot."

"What?!"

I couldn't believe the stakes he had just forced on me.

"Is something the matter? A duel requires the stakes to be equal for both parties. Even you must be aware of this."

"O-of course I know that! But in what world are those equal stakes?!"

One participant would have to take back a single statement, while the other would have to withdraw from the academy. There was no way anyone could call those terms equivalent.

"This is truly painful to watch... What about this do you not understand, Reject Swordsman? Your quitting the academy would be of very little consequence. After all—you *yourself* are of very little consequence."

"..."

It killed me, but I had no immediate comeback. He was spot-on. My grades were far and away the lowest at Grand Swordcraft Academy. They were so bad that it wouldn't have surprised me if I was dismissed any day now... Withdrawing would certainly mean nothing to the academy.

"...Understood. I challenge you to a duel on those conditions...!"

"I accept! How does tomorrow morning at nine in the gymnasium sound to you?"

"I have no objections."

"Wonderful. I'll take care of the application for the duel. You just focus on your trademark *hard work* to try and make our match at least resemble a duel...though, I'm sure you are well aware your efforts will go to waste. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Thus it was decided I would duel Dodriel, a true genius of the blade. Now that I'd had a moment to think about it, I realized that it was a foolish thing to do.

But if someone said the same thing to me now...I would probably challenge them to a duel all over again...

My morals would not allow me to stay silent as my mom was insulted.

But Dodriel is really strong...

He was a prodigy in every sense of the word. Though he didn't practice that much, he would immediately soak up any technique he saw and make it his own, like a sponge.

Rumor had it that he was even being recruited by the Elite Five Academies, the prestigious schools of swordcraft in the capital.

I totally get that he's stronger than me. But tomorrow at least, there's no way I can lose...!

Losing would mean I'd have to withdraw from the academy. But most importantly, I needed to make him take back his insult to Mom.

After we went our separate ways and I returned to the dorm, I then headed straight for the forest with a sword in hand. Arriving at my usual practice spot, I focused my undivided attention on wielding my blade.

"Hah, yah, ho...!"

Surrounded by the silence of the forest, I frantically trained as if my life depended on it. I wasn't doing this out of desperation. It was simply the only thing I knew how to do.

After I enrolled at the academy, I approached each of the teachers and begged them to let me into their schools of swordcraft. But the response was always the same.

"You have no talent with the blade, unfortunately. I cannot take you into my instruction."

"What did you say?! I'm almost impressed that someone as unskilled as you would have the guts to ask to be my pupil. Have you no shame?"

"Ever heard the phrase know your place?"

Everyone had rejected me out of hand, so I'd had no one to learn from. As a result, I didn't know any forms, nor schools of swordcraft, nor techniques. All I'd learned in class was how to swing my weapon and hone my body.

The only way I knew how to train was to simply keep swinging, like I was now.

I kept at it for a while, finally letting up when the moonlight began to illuminate the surrounding area.

"Ha, ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha...!"

I let out a dry, humorless chuckle.

"I'm such an idiot. No amount of practice will get me the win

tomorrow...!"

Swinging my sword around like a madman was utterly pointless. I was going to lose to that prodigy the next day, no matter what I did. It would be a brutal defeat.

The gap between Dodriel and I couldn't be shored up in a day.

I hate it... I hate it, I hate it, I hate it!

Though I was loath to admit it, no matter how many times I played out our duel in my mind, I just couldn't envision myself beating him.

"What can I do...?"

Tears of frustration slid down my face.

...I want to win. I want to strike Dodriel down and make him take back that insult...

But I just wasn't good enough, not by any stretch of the imagination. I lacked strength, I lacked ability—and most of all, I lacked time...

"Dammit!"

Stricken by helplessness, I pounded a fist onto the ground. That's when I suddenly heard a hoarse voice from above.

"Hyo-hoh-hoh. Something appears to be troubling you deeply, young swordsman."

"Wh-who's there?!"

I jerked my head up to find a short old man standing directly in front of me. The hair on his head, his eyebrows, and his beard were all snow-white. His back was clearly bent, and he was gripping a cane in one hand. What unsettled me more than anything was how he'd managed to get this close without me noticing him at all.

"Who am I? Hmm... I suppose you could call me the Time Hermit," answered the mysterious old man, running a hand through his impressive beard, which nearly reached the ground.

"Anyhoo, is something the matter, young swordsman? How would you like to share your problems with this weary old man?"

"...Talking to you about it won't change anything."

"Are you sure, sonny? Keeping your troubles to yourself takes a real toll on the mind. You'll be surprised by how much better it feels to confide in someone. You don't need to hold back. I already have one foot in the grave anyway! Hyo-hoh-hoh!"

He laughed as if he had said something hilarious.

"...Yeah, you might be right."

I was getting desperate. Not knowing what else to do, I began to recount the hopeless situation I'd gotten myself into.

I told him about how I had no talent with the blade; about the bullying at the academy; about my mom, who I'd left in my hometown; and about the duel the next day. Spilling everything that had been building up in my mind definitely made me feel a little better.

“I see... So that’s what has you in such low spirits...”

The Time Hermit listened to me earnestly, without making fun of anything I said. He was a surprisingly good listener, which I suppose came down to the wisdom of old age.

“Hmm, if that’s your predicament...I may be able to give you some help.”

“...How?”

If there was some magical method that could flip this totally hopeless situation on its head, I was all ears.

He twisted his wrinkled face into a grin.

“Hyo-hoh...by using this.”

From out of his pocket, he produced a fist-sized red button.

“...What is that?”

“The ‘100-Million-Year Button,’ an incredibly rare magical item.”

“Hundred-million-year button...? Magic item...?”

“Indeed. Anyone who presses this button will instantly receive the effects of having trained for one hundred million years! Can you imagine a more useful tool?”

“...That sounds hard to believe.”

Those were my honest feelings.

“Now, now, at least hear me out. This is the request of a man in his last moments of life...”

The Time Hermit put his hands together in an entreaty. He had just listened to everything I had to say...so I decided to lend him my ear for a little bit.

“Okay, I will. But please keep it short.”

“Oh-ho, so you will listen! Thank you, thank you!”

He cleared his throat with a cough and began to describe the 100-Million-Year Button.

“All who push this button are transported to an ‘alternate world,’ where, as the name implies, they spend one hundred million years. In that world, you are completely free. You can even spend all your time staring at the wall if you’re so inclined. But you can also devote yourself to your training. After all, you do have a full one hundred million years at your disposal.”

“I can train for one hundred million years...?”

Given my current predicament, this sounded like a dream come true.

“Yes, you can! You’ll also have a house and a bed—and even a large bath! There’s a magical storehouse that produces an infinite amount of food, so you’ll never go hungry! On top of that, you won’t age, so you have no need to fear death!”

“...!”

Eating and sleeping would be taken care of, I would have all the

time I could ever want, and I wouldn't even age.

I gulped. This sounded way too good to be true.

"Hyo-hoh-hoh! Sounds wonderful, right?"

Having finished his explanation, the Time Hermit suddenly leaned forward and thrust the scarlet button toward me.

I stared at it.

If I really could train for one hundred million years...

I thought that might give me a chance to beat Dodriel.

Four or five years, for instance, would be way too short a time frame to catch up to him.

But given one hundred million years, even a talentless swordsman like me could catch up to a genius like him— Scratch that, I could surpass him!

The utter stupidity of that thought brought me crashing back to reality.

This is way too good to be true... Geez, why did I let myself take this seriously...?

This wasn't a fairy tale. No way could that exist in the real world.

"Is that all you have to say?" I asked.

"Hmm? Does this not sound appealing to you?" he responded.

"I think it would be amazing...if what you're saying is true."

"I'm not lying! I have never once told a lie, not in all my long life!"

"Uh-huh. That's impressive."

I cut off our conversation there and returned to swinging my weapon. Despite knowing no amount of practice would give me a chance at victory, I wanted to do everything I could.

"Hmph... Are you really sure you don't want to give it a try? All you have to do is press it once. Please, I'm asking you as an old man with little time left!"

The Time Hermit rubbed his hands together in a fervent plea. I was a little surprised by how badly he wanted me to do this.

"Fine...I'll push the button." I sighed.

Figuring that tapping it once would satisfy him, I casually reached my hand toward it and stopped when the Time Hermit's face suddenly turned gravely serious.

"Young swordsman. I have one warning for you."

"What is it now?"

"There is one thing you must never do—commit suicide. You'll be living in another world, but you still only have one body. Dying there will spell the end of you," he cautioned. Where the heck did that come from?

"Yeah, yeah. I get it."

Then I pressed the button cradled in his hands. I had no idea how this was about to alter the course of my life.

The next thing I knew, I was standing in an unfamiliar place.

“...Where am I?”

I looked around to find brown earth extending as far as the eye could see and a single large, white house placed in the middle of it.

I noticed one more thing—a string of numbers in the sky.

Year 000000000 Month 1 Day 1 00:01:31.

The final number was going up every second. It must have been some kind of clock.

Once I was sure that I wasn't in any danger, I reflected on how I got here.

“The Time Hermit said something really weird... Oh yeah, I pushed the 100-Million-Year Button.”

Did that make this the “alternate world” he was talking about?

“Ha, ha-ha... This has to be some kind of trick...”

Letting out a nervous laugh, I began to panic. I just needed to stay calm and think about this logically— No, wait, everything about this defied logic. There was no way a 100-Million-Year Button could be real. That sounded like something from a children's tale. It couldn't actually exist.

But now that this *impossible world* lay right before my eyes, I had no choice but to accept the button's existence.

“This makes no sense...right?”

I raised my head to see an endless blue sky.

“...It's not there.”

Something was clearly missing from the sky—the sun. Despite its absence, the world was still filled with a warm glow. And light shining in a place with no source resulted in a total lack of shadows, as if the *laws of physics were in disorder*. Reluctantly, I had to accept that this was an “alternate world” separate from reality.

I pinched my cheek just to check if this was a dream, but I indeed felt pain. My mind, my senses, and my body were all telling me I was actually here.

“There's no doubt about it now. That 100-Million-Year Button was real!”

Now that I'd come to that conclusion, I thought back on what the Time Hermit had explained.

“All who push this button are transported to an alternate world, where, as the name implies, they spend one hundred million years'...is what he said, I think.”

I looked up and stared at the giant clock floating in the sky.

If the Time Hermit's words were true...I could train in this alternate world right up until that clock displayed the year *one hundred million*.

“All right!”

I shouted with jubilation.

I can win... I can win!

If I had this much time, I would definitely be able to defeat Dodriel, no matter how much of a prodigy he was!

“I can’t believe it. He was actually telling the truth.”

I would have to thank the Time Hermit as soon as I got out of here.

“I can’t just stand around!”

Drawing my sword, I began swinging right away. Time tended to move faster than one might have expected. I was sure one hundred million years would pass in no time.

I’ve been given a huge opportunity. I can’t waste a single second!

After that, I devoted myself fully to wielding my blade and didn’t look at the clock again until my stomach gave a massive growl.

“Huh, it’s already been this long?”

I looked at the clock in the sky to see that twenty hours had already passed. Given the absence of the sun, it was a bit hard to tell the time here.

“All right, might as well go find some food.”

Taking a break from practicing, I entered the large white house in front of me.

“Wow, it’s way bigger on the inside!”

Not only was it significantly more spacious than my mom’s house and the dorm where I lived now, but it was also tremendously clean. There wasn’t a single speck of dust in the place, as though it were cleaned every single day.

“Hmm, where was the food again?”

According to the Time Hermit, a magical storehouse produced an endless supply of food in this world.

I searched the house and quickly found a giant refrigerator in the kitchen. I opened the large double doors.

“Huh?!”

Meat, vegetables, fish, milk... The fridge was packed tight with every conceivable kind of ingredient. I grabbed a tomato that was directly in front of me, wiped it gently with my clothes, and sank my teeth into it.

“...! Th-that’s delicious...!”

It was as fresh and juicy as if it had been picked that morning. The sweet taste filled my mouth.

Next, I ate some dried meat and vegetables that didn’t require any preparation and headed right for the bathroom.

“It’s huge...!”

The bathtub was ten times bigger than I expected. I quickly got in.

“Ahh, the water feels so good...”

Even though I didn't adjust it at all, it was somehow the perfect temperature. Neither too hot nor too cool—it was perfectly warm. The muscles throughout my body slowly relaxed.

After my bath, I got ready to sleep and headed for my bedroom. Additionally, I glimpsed what looked like a library on the way there, but I passed by it without stopping. I wasn't going to spend my time on anything other than training. That level of focus would cause one hundred million years to pass by in a flash.

“So sooooft...”

The bed in my bedroom was spacious and otherworldly soft. My body sank into the plush mattress.

“This is incredible,” I muttered to myself while wrapped in the fluffy, warm comforter.

I had delicious food, a relaxing bath, and a soft bed. And more than anything, I had one hundred million years. Nothing could beat this. This was the best environment I could have asked for.

“Heh-heh, I'll train for the full one hundred million years. Then I'll surely become an amazing swordsman...”

Filled with great hope and ambition, I slowly drifted off to sleep.



Ten years had already passed since I'd come to this world. By honing my skills with the blade every day during that time, I came to grasp the essence of swordcraft.

I wonder if I can consider this optimized yet...

I knew the best timing for both when to put force behind my sword and when to let up during a downward vertical strike. This wasn't vague intuition—I had come to completely internalize it.

One hundred years later.

By this time, I had learned a great many moves. For example...

“First Style—Flying Shadow!”

...I'd even mastered a projectile slash attack.

I'd been trying to name the various moves I devised. It felt as though I'd become the founder of a new school of swordcraft. This was a blast.

One thousand years later.

...I'd gotten a bit tired. Probably more mentally than physically.

I was repeating the same thing day in, day out. First, I would practice, then eat, then sleep. That was all I had done for an entire millennium. My days were dull and monotonous, with zero new stimulation. I just did the same thing over, and over, and over again. This lifestyle was beginning to wear on my mind.

One day, I decided to take a walk as a little diversion and quickly

discovered that this world was much smaller than I had assumed.

I concluded that it must be shaped like a small sphere. If I left the house and walked straight, it didn't take long to end up at the back of my house. This world was tiny—even smaller than the schoolyard at Grand Swordcraft Academy. I suppose this was the first time I'd felt lonely since arriving.

"I wonder if Mom is doing okay..."

I spent that day swinging my sword as well.

Ten thousand years later.

Humans being the strange creatures that they are, I eventually fully adapted to my new environment.

Thinking back on it, things were toughest around the five thousandth year.

At that time, all the food I would eat—meat, fish, vegetables, you name it—had come to taste like flavorless rubber. When greeting my doorknob had become part of my daily routine, I'd really started to worry that I was spiraling.

However, I had been able to overcome that crisis surprisingly easily. The moment that I internalized living in total solitude with no people around as "normal," my mind was set totally at ease. Nobody found it weird that humans couldn't fly through the sky. Since we didn't have wings like birds, that was merely common sense. So if you could accept living in solitude as "normal," then it would simply become another part of your everyday routine and cease to bother you.



I suppose the simplest way of putting it was that I learned how to suppress unwanted emotion.

“Hah! Yah! Ho!”

In an alternate reality where complete isolation was just part of life, I continued to swing my sword.

One hundred thousand years later.

Recently, I'd started turning my attention toward things other than swordcraft. I'd become particularly enthusiastic about cooking. The art of cooking was extraordinarily deep. You could accomplish a surprising variety of things from the way you wielded your knife alone.

I focused silently in front of my cutting board.

“Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!”

My blade danced through the air as I performed eight rapid slash attacks in less than a second, carving the fish on the cutting board into eight slices.

I coated the perfectly fresh sashimi with soy sauce before taking a bite.

“That's delicious!”

Afterward, I used some cookbooks in the library to study a variety of culinary techniques. I learned how to chop food into half circles, large chunks, and thin rectangles. There were many cutting skills I was unfamiliar with.

If I can translate this to my fighting style, I'm sure I'll come up with some great moves!

Filled with anticipation and excitement, I devoted myself to strict training with the knife.

One million years later.

Long story short, it didn't work out as I expected.

Cooking and swordcraft were two very different disciplines. That should be pretty obvious. No matter how fast I got at chopping vegetables, that skill wasn't going to translate to anything else.

It was Dodriel I needed to defeat, not a cabbage.

I can't believe how much time I wasted...

I felt like I was going a little crazy.

That wasn't really surprising. I had been honing my blade alone in an empty world with no human contact for one million years, all while suppressing my emotions.

“Haaah...”

I took a deep breath to center my mind and body.

...I'm fine. I still have plenty of time. There's no need to panic yet.

I still had ninety-nine million years left. That was a hard fact.

All right...I'm going to make the most of my remaining time!

After renewing my resolve, I once again set down the path of

swordcraft.

Ten million years later.

I'd devised a new method of training, the art of "fighting oneself."

By simply closing my eyes and focusing my mind, I would see my own form emerge on the backs of my eyelids.

My other self assumed the middle stance, pointing his sword toward my eyes. He radiated tremendous malice.

His fundamentals were as perfect as could be, so his guard was flawless.

I mirrored him by assuming the middle stance as well. We charged at each other the moment our eyes met, as if that were an agreement we had reached beforehand.

““Hah!””

Our swords screeched and sent sparks flying as they violently collided.

Unsurprisingly, our skills were completely equal. We were both intimately familiar with the other's swordplay and had a full understanding of our opponent's weaknesses. Our grueling duels would never conclude.

My swordcraft had achieved a new level of intensity.

Fifty million years later.

Around the halfway mark to one hundred million years, I began to feel a mounting sense of frustration.

I had spent fifty million years—an extraordinarily long time—devoting myself to my blade. Despite my lack of talent, I was pretty sure that I had become a bit stronger.

But could I really defeat that prodigy right now?

Dodriel Barton was the kind of genius who only came around once a century. He was a student of the Autumn Rain School of Swordcraft, a style famous even in the capital, and I'd heard he was one of the very best.

His slender physique belied his significant strength. He was capable of wielding a variety of swords, regardless of type, with such grace that they seemed like an extension of his body. Additionally, his innate talent allowed him to reproduce any move after glimpsing it just once. There wasn't a single person in the area who had not heard the name *Dodriel*. He was undoubtedly the greatest swordsman at Grand Swordcraft Academy.

I'm still not good enough.

There was *something* still missing in my blade. It could have been a state of mind, experience, intimidation factor—I didn't yet know what it was.

But I know I'm missing the special something I need to beat Dodriel...

I still had fifty million years... Actually, I *only* had fifty million

years.

Now that I was thinking about it, the first fifty million years had really passed by in a flash. It felt like it was just the previous day that I'd pushed the 100-Million-Year Button.

I need to hurry!

“Hah! Yah! Ho!”

Spurred by a sense of panic, I devoted my undivided attention to my daily training regime. I practiced with demonic intensity, now investing every waking moment into my swordcraft with total disregard for day and night.

Dammit! Time is moving too fast...

Time is a mysterious thing. The harder one concentrates, the faster it moves. The tendency for time to move faster when you're having fun is a well-known phenomenon.

So close— Time is short; I just need a little longer— Time always seems to accelerate when you think along those lines.

I swung my sword single-mindedly, and before I knew it, the end arrived.

The clock in the sky finally struck *Year 099999999 Month 12 Day 31 23:59:59*. The next second, the world began to collapse slowly.

“It's over...”

The white house and the giant clock began to slowly disappear into white particles.

I was being returned to the real world.

Please, one more go, just one more time is all I need... I want another one hundred million years...

I was positive that I was on the verge of unlocking the *special something* I needed to beat Dodriel. It felt just beyond my grasp.

Shit! I only needed a little longer...

A feeling of dissatisfaction tormented me as the world was utterly destroyed.



“Huh...?”

When I came to, I was standing in a nostalgic place. I recognized it as the forest I trained in over one hundred million years ago. I looked up and saw the sun. It was shining brightly, right where it was supposed to be. I had returned to reality.

“Hyo-hoh-hoh! How was it? How do you feel after practicing for one hundred million years?” the Time Hermit asked me cheerfully while clapping his hands together.

“I feel strange...”

My body didn't really feel that different. My mind was just a little

hazy.

“Did I actually train for one hundred million years...?”

My brain felt sluggish, as if I had awoken from a very long sleep. I found myself wondering if the 100-Million-Year Button and the strange alternate world were both just a dream.

“Hmm, you may be feeling a little *timesick*. But fear not, young swordsman. I guarantee that the one hundred million years you spent diligently honing your swordplay will benefit you in the real world.”

“Are you sure? I don’t feel any sign that it did.”

“Hyo-hoh-hoooooh! The changes you have undergone are too great for you to even notice! Well, you know what they say—*seeing is believing*. Give your steel a swing.”

“...Yeah, why not?”

Was that one hundred million years real, or a dream? I would know immediately after one wave of my sword.

I reached for the blade at my waist.

“Hmm?”

When I touched the scabbard, I felt an odd sensation. It was as if it were adhering to my palm without the need for me to consciously put any strength into my grip. I had never felt that before.

No way...

I felt a small spark of hope and lightly brandished my weapon.

“Hah!”

A violent gust of wind immediately stirred the trees in front of me.

“...?!”

Unless my eyes were deceiving me, the power of that slash had just broken three branches. It was so intense that it created an optical illusion of the space in front of me being distorted.

“Hyo-hoh-hoh, was that not amazing? You’re a new man, young swordsman!”

The Time Hermit clapped his hands and laughed, but I wasn’t ready to celebrate yet.

I-it wasn’t a dream?!

I was able to perform a slash attack exactly as I’d learned to do it in that world.

I need to do it again before I forget that feeling!

Directing my excitement into my blade, I attempted a horizontal strike.

“Hah!”

A few seconds later, I heard a delayed sound of something cutting through air. I had just effortlessly surpassed the speed of sound.

“I-incredible!”

I didn’t feel like I had merely become more comfortable with the sword—I felt almighty, like the sword and I were one.

“Hyo-hoh! Let me guess—you feel as if you have been reborn.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly it!”

I had endured one hundred million years of training and emerged with a firm grasp of the true essence of swordplay.

But I’m not quite there yet... There’s still something missing...

I still wasn’t good enough. I would not be able to beat Dodriel as I was now.

It was undeniable that I was significantly stronger than before. If my duel with Dodriel were to consist only of simple attacks—diagonal cuts, upward slashes, horizontal sweeps—I would at least be able to give him an equal match.

The problem is his moves from the Autumn Rain Style...

The moves in a school of swordcraft were developed over great periods of time. Generations of predecessors had birthed these devastating attacks over lifetimes of training.

I had never once been accepted into one of these schools, so I didn’t know a single move of theirs. This created an enormous gulf between me and Dodriel.

He’s a real prodigy. I definitely need a special something to breach that gulf and beat him...

And I would also need time to find it.

“Hey, can I...press the 100-Million-Year Button one more time?”

I had nothing to lose by asking. After hearing my question, the Time Hermit broke into a wide grin.

“Of course, young swordsman. *You can press it as many times as you like!*”

He cheerfully passed me the 100-Million-Year Button.

“R-really?! Thank you so much!”

Giving him my heartfelt gratitude, I pushed the button again.



I found myself back in the World of Time. The clock in the sky displayed *Year 000000000 Month 1 Day 1 00:00:01*.

How many times is this now...?

I had lost count somewhere around my tenth trip to this world. If I had to guess, I would say I’d pushed the button around fourteen or fifteen times. Anyway, I was pretty sure it was less than twenty.

I had made many trips between the real world and the World of Time, resulting in over one billion years of silent training as I searched for that special something I was missing. The results, however, were unsatisfactory.

I guess this is the barrier you can’t overcome without talent...

It felt so close but still incredibly far away. A massive, invisible

barrier towered over me—the wall of talent.

I had been made to feel the gap between geniuses and normal people many times in my life...though, in my case, it was the gap between geniuses and failures. Now that I had spent so much time trying to cross it, I understood that gap better than ever.

That didn't mean I was going to give up. *Hard work will always bear fruit*—sincerely believing in my mom's words, I practiced free from distraction every single day.

Then one day, something suddenly changed.

“Wh-what the?!”

When I swung my sword down like I always did, the space its tip passed through *swayed*.

I knew I wasn't merely seeing things. Although it was very slight, my weapon had torn through the world itself.

“Ha-ha-ha... This—this is it...! This attack is the special something I've been searching for!”

The small hole I had just opened up might have enabled me to bust through the impenetrable barrier of talent. My hard work spanning many one-hundred-million-year trips to this world had finally paid off.

I swung my blade intently for another million years. The swaying its tip created grew larger day by day. I could hardly contain my joy at having finally achieved real growth.

Devoting the rest of my time to practice, I repeated the motion over and over again. Before I knew it, the clock in the sky had reached *Year 0999999999 Month 12 Day 31 23:59:30*.

In thirty more seconds, I would once again be returned to the real world.

“Phew...”

I can do this.

With my next swing, I was going to obtain that special something... I would be capable of a world-tearing slash.

I wasn't sure why, but I was confident in that belief.

“I'll never see this world again...”

Once I perfected my world-rending slash attack, I would finally be ready for my duel with Dodriel.

This would be my last good-bye to the World of Time. It had served me so well for more than one billion years.

At that thought, a strange feeling welled up inside me, a complex combination of joy, sorrow, and the sense that I was going to miss this place.

“All right, let's do this.”

After preparing myself emotionally, I flourished my sword above my head and brought it swinging down.

“HAH!”

As I opened an enormous rift in the air, the World of Time began to crumble around me noisily.

CHAPTER 2

The Reject Swordsman & the Swordcraft Academy

I heard a voice.

“All...up! It’s morni...ke up!”

Though I couldn’t make out what it was saying, I got the sense it was calling me.

I opened my eyes slowly and saw the blue sky above me through bleary eyes. I had been sleeping faceup.

Huh? What was I...?

My hazy vision slowly came into focus, and my other senses returned to me as well.

I became aware of the cool ground, the smell of the grass, my parched throat, the bright sun—and a voice calling out to me.

“Allen! Allen, wake up! What are you sleeping out here for?!”

The matron of my dorm, Ms. Paula, was staring down at me.

“?!”

I jumped up in a panic.

“What year is it?! What month?! What’s the time...?!” I asked in a panic.

She sighed in exasperation.

“What in heaven’s name are you talking about, Allen? Are you still dreaming?”

“Uh, well...I guess it’s over, then.”

I had finished my billion-plus years of training and returned to the real world.

“Oh yeah, where’d the Time Hermit go?!”

I spun around to look for him but didn’t see him anywhere.

“Huh...?”

“Time...what now? Allen, are you sure you’re okay?” Ms. Paula

asked gently as I stood there, dumbfounded.

“Uh...yeah, I’m fine. Sorry...”

“You were twisting and turning in your sleep... Did you have a nightmare?”

“I...guess I did.”

Maybe it was all just a dream. No, it had to have been a dream. Logically, there was no way a 100-Million-Year Button could exist.

“You can tell me about it if you want. That will prevent it from coming true.”

“...I don’t remember much about it. Sorry.”

That was a lie. I couldn’t have remembered it any more clearly. She would laugh at me if I told her something so nonsensical, though.

“Is that so? Then get your butt back to the dorm! Breakfast has been ready for ages. If you don’t eat soon, I won’t clean up after you!”

She spun on her heel and walked back toward the dorm.

“I-I’m sorry...”

As I apologized and started to follow after her, I stopped in my tracks. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a red button shining enchantingly. My eyes were not deceiving me. Where had I seen it before...? Right.

“The 100-Million-Year Button?!”

I trembled.

So that wasn’t a dream?!

I gulped, then gently picked it up.

I took one, two, three deep breaths to ready myself, then slammed my hand onto the button.

Nothing happened.

“Well, that’s not surprising...”

The Time Hermit, the 100-Million-Year Button, the World of Time—it all must have really been a dream. I shouldn’t have expected any different. This was reality, not a children’s tale. Tossing the button back down onto the ground, I then noticed something.

There was a gash on the button that looked like it had been inflicted by a large sword.

Huh...? Was that there before...?

I was about to move toward the button to take another close look at it, but...

“Allen! Quit your dillydallying and hurry up!”

...Ms. Paula’s booming voice called out from ahead of me.

“Y-yes, ma’am!”

Leaving the strangely shining button behind, I followed her back to the dorm.



Paula Garedzall was the matron of the dorm I lived in. Standing about 198 centimeters tall, she had a large build and a face with powerful features. She was wearing a pure-white apron over a black shirt, with her sleeves rolled up to bare her arms, which were three times bigger than mine. Though she looked scary and difficult to approach at first, she was actually a very nice person.

I put my hands together in thanks after scarfing down the breakfast she made for me.

“Thank you for breakfast.”

“My pleasure! You wiped that plate clean. That’s good for your growing body!”

She slapped me on the back and laughed heartily.

“So, Allen, how is school going?”

“?!”

My heart leaped out of my chest at her question. It reminded me that I had a duel with Dodriel this morning at nine.

“Wh-what time is it?!”

“Let’s see, it’s ten minutes to eight,” she said, pointing at the clock on the wall.

“You can’t be serious...”

Even if I hurried, it would take me three hours to reach Grand Swordcraft Academy from here. Making it in just over an hour was an impossibility. A lot more rode on duels at swordcraft academies than one’s word—there was an established system built around them. If a contestant arrived even one second late for the start of a duel, they lost by default.

I probably... No, I definitely won’t make it in time.

But I couldn’t just go to my room and sulk about it. Not going was not an option. At the very least, I didn’t want it to look like I fled from that jerk Dodriel.

“I-I’ll see you later!”

“Be careful out there, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

I dashed out of the dorm and ran like a man possessed. I wasn’t going to stop until I reached the academy.

...Huh? I feel like I’ve gotten in better shape.

I seemed to fly through the landscape around me.

After I arrived at the academy, I headed straight for the Duel Office in the Second Building.

“S-sorry I’m late! I’m Allen Rodol—I was scheduled to have a duel this morning at nine! Did you already process it?!” I asked hurriedly, spittle flying from my mouth.

The bespectacled receptionist looked at a piece of paper and tilted his head in confusion.

“Hmm? You’re here considerably early. There’s still an hour before your duel.”

“...Whuh?” I responded dumbly. “An hour early... Are you sure?”

That was beyond impossible.

I left the dorm at ten to eight. There was no way I could have reached the academy in just ten minutes.

“Yes, look here.”

He pointed at a clock on the desk, which definitely read eight o’clock.

It really is only ten minutes later... Maybe the clock at the dorm is broken...?

Regardless, I had made it. That meant I had at least escaped disqualification.

Now all I had left to do was to show off the fruits of my labor by giving Dodriel my best shot.



After arriving at Grand Swordcraft Academy earlier than expected, I passed the time by going to the cafeteria and eating my usual discount meal of rice and seaweed. For some reason, I had gotten very hungry again, despite having just eaten breakfast. I waited until five minutes before our start time, then headed to the gymnasium, the designated location of our duel.

I couldn’t have expected what I saw when I arrived.

“What in the...?!”

Despite the early hour, the gym was packed with students beyond capacity.

“Look, the Reject Swordsman just arrived!”

“He’s finally gonna be sent packing! Watching him wave his sword around like a total idiot every day made my eyes bleed!”

“We’ll all have to thank Dodriel for getting rid of this parasite!”

Jeers rained down from my fellow classmates. They were so loud that I wanted to plug my ears.

“H-how did...?!”

I stood there in bewilderment and then heard an obnoxious laugh. Turning toward the voice, I saw Dodriel and his followers standing in the middle of the gym. He sneered mockingly, ignoring my obvious discomposure.

“Ha! I have to say I’m impressed you decided to show up instead of fleeing, Allen.”

“D-Dodriel! What the hell is this? No one told me this was going to happen!” I asked, pointing at the students filling the gym.

“What can I say? This caught me by surprise, too... Word of our

duel must have leaked somehow. There are some really sick people out there, you know?"

He gave an exaggerated shrug.

"Y-you asshole..."

Undoubtedly, he had been the one to spread word of the duel throughout the academy, gathering so many here. I bet he wanted to humiliate me in front of the whole student body. Just how awful could one person be?

"Kick that Reject Swordsman's ass!"

"AAAH! I love you, Dodriel! You can do it!!!"

As the students clamored for Dodriel's victory and my unsightly defeat, a male professor entered the gymnasium. Though he seemed surprised at first by the number of students and their deafening cheers, he ignored them and walked toward us without a word.

"Now then...the appointed time has arrived. On my mark, the duel between Dodriel Barton and Allen Rodol will begin."

It looked like he wasn't even going to question these circumstances. The conditions of a duel needed to be equal for both sides. It was obvious that I would be at a disadvantage in this environment.

The academy is supposed to be neutral. If they don't say a word about these unfair circumstances...

That meant they wanted to get rid of me, too.

Crap...

Surrounded by enemies, all I could do was grit my teeth.

"*Ahem.* Are both of you ready? Okay—begin!"

He started the duel with relative disinterest. The environment could not have been more unfavorable for me, but I had to fight.

"Try to last longer than a few seconds, okay, Allen? I want to torment you until you're sobbing and begging for forgiveness!"

He drew the sword at his hip and smiled sadistically.

"Take me lightly at your peril!" I shouted in response.

Unsheathing my blade and holding it at my navel, I took the most basic of swordcraft stances—the middle stance.

The air between us tensed, and our gazes met.

I took a darting glance at his sword. The beautiful pattern on his blade was clearly visible from a distance. He was always boasting that some master craftsman had forged it.

My sword, on the other hand, was only worth one thousand guld—the lowest-quality blade that money could buy, which you could find just about anywhere.

I probably can't beat him... No, I definitely can't.

I was no match for his sword, skill, or innate talent.

But that doesn't mean I'll just surrender!

Even I had pride as a student of the sword—and as a man.

I will not withdraw in disgrace after he insulted Mom!

With a renewed fire burning inside me, I glared directly at Dodriel.

His sword was specialized for offense, designed to rain down a barrage of attacks so powerful that its opponent wouldn't be able to counter. If we crossed blades directly, I wouldn't stand a chance of winning.

I just need one devastating counterattack!

He was a prodigy, but he was still human. He could still make mistakes.

That means I just need to focus on enduring his fierce attacks!

My strategy would be to search for an opening amid our intense duel, then attack with all my strength. I might have been incapable of winning, but I could at least try to wound him. That was my thought process.

All right, come at me!

I readied myself and waited for him to charge.

Unexpectedly, however, he did not attack. Actually, he was standing farther away than usual and was making no move to approach me.

...What the heck is he plotting?

This was suspiciously unlike him.

"Allen... What did you do?!"

The sneer he had been wearing was gone, replaced by a rigid glare.

"What are you talking about? I don't understand the question."

"How dare you play dumb with me, Reject Swordsman!"

Dodriel gritted his teeth in anger and began sliding his feet to circle around me while maintaining a sizable distance. I held my stance and kept him in the center of my vision.

He's not normally this patient.

I knew as much about him as he knew about me.

Dodriel had a short temper and tired of things quickly. Despite his being a true prodigy, there was no way he would suffer this boring staring contest for long. I was sure he would rush at me at any moment.

One minute passed, then two, and he suddenly changed his stance.

Here he comes!

"RAAAAAAH!"

Dodriel gave a tremendous yell and ran directly at me.

"..."

While feeling as though I might be overwhelmed by his monstrous intensity at any moment, I braced myself and watched him carefully. However, what unfolded next was quite strange.

...Huh?

I waited for him, but it was taking him quite a long time to reach me. I then realized that he was intentionally moving in slow motion,

like a kid in a pretend sword fight.

What is he thinking...?

I quickly reasoned out the answer to that question.

Oh, I see... I'm not even worth taking seriously...

He was making a show of how I wasn't worth the effort of using his full skill.

This was depressing. I wouldn't have thought he would take the ridicule this far. I'd hoped that in a duel, at least, he would give me an honest fight.

Dammit...

Clenching my fists tight, I gritted my teeth in an effort to hold my temper. A few seconds later, he finally reached me and attacked.

"Autumn Rain Style—Rainy Season!"

He thrust his sword repeatedly with bland and crude movements that practically invited me to evade them.

I can avoid these effortlessly.

His attacks were so slow, I felt like yawning. I dodged each one with a minimal amount of movement.

"Huh?!"

Dodriel quit thrusting his sword, then jumped back immediately with his face as white as a sheet.

"A-Allen...? How did you dodge all my attacks? Your luck must be running high today..."

"...What?"

"But I'm warmed up now. My next attack will be thrice as fast! Luck won't save you again!"

"What the heck are you—?"

My question was cut short.

"Autumn Rain Style Secret Technique—Downpour!"

He pointed his sword directly at me and charged again. This time, he came at me with one central thrust instead of a succession of quick ones.

I...guess this maneuver is faster than before? Maybe?

It still felt like a child playing with a toy sword.

What bothered me more than anything was how he was leaving himself completely open to attack as he charged, as though he was provoking me to take a swing at him.

How much more are you going to insult me?

Fed up with his constant provocations, I raised my sword up high.

"Will you take this seriously?!"

I brought my blade down, intending it as a simple threat, but it somehow turned into a seven-part slash attack.

"What the? Huh...?!"

Every one of my attacks connected, knocking the sword from his

hand and sending him flying back into the wall of the gymnasium. The place grew so quiet that you could hear someone swallow.

“...What?”

That was all I could manage to say after this unexpected development.

“D-Dodriel Barton has been knocked out! Allen Rodol is the winner!”

The gym remained dead silent even after the male professor serving as the referee declared the result of the match.

That...wasn't a dream...?!



There was no denying it now. The billion-plus years I spent in the World of Time had been no dream or illusion.

His attacks looked weirdly slow, but...it wasn't because he was toying with me.

I had actually grown significantly stronger than him!



A few days had passed since my duel with Dodriel. The bullying toward me had gotten worse than ever.

It was much different from the bullying I'd received before, though. Until now, students had always picked on me directly by doing stuff like intentionally bumping into me or kicking my desk, but that stopped immediately after my dominant victory. Instead, I started to bear the brunt of more insults behind my back.

"Reject Swordsman," "coward," "wimp"—those were the kinds of insults I heard all around the academy. I was sure it was Dodriel and his followers who started it. But strangely enough, it didn't bother me.

My old self... My old self from 1.5 billion years ago definitely wouldn't have been able to handle it.

I was able to keep a calm mind and look at myself objectively.

"I wonder how Mom is doing..."

While walking back to the dorm, where Ms. Paula was waiting, I suddenly thought of my mom, who I had left behind in my hometown.

It had already been three years since I started attending Grand Swordcraft Academy. I had kept in touch by writing a letter every month, but never returned home. I was so focused on my training that the opportunity didn't arise.

"Okay...it's a plan. I'll go home on my next break."

My hometown of Goza Village was about ten hours away at jogging speed, but I was sure I could make the trip faster now.

"Oh yeah, I guess I should get her some kind of present."

This would be my first time home in three years, so I couldn't show up empty-handed.

I'm pretty sure she loves senbei...

It would definitely make her happy if I brought her some snacks.

Wait, how much money do I have again?

I took out a coin purse and upended it over my hand. Three coins clinked out.

"F-five hundred and twenty guld..."

I couldn't afford a decent present with that.

"...Maybe I should get a part-time job."

I decided I would consult Ms. Paula about finding a job. She knew a lot of people, so I thought she might be able to give me a good

recommendation. I would also feel safe working at a place that she introduced to me.

"I'm sure Mom will be surprised to see me after so long." I chuckled. I hummed to myself as I headed back to the dorm.



As soon as I returned, I asked Ms. Paula if she knew of any good part-time jobs.

"You want to get a job?!"

"Yes. Can you think of any suitable places offering work?"

"Where's this coming from? What about your sword training?" she asked, puzzled.

"My training is important to me, but I've been thinking it's about time I return home to see my mom, and..."

"I see the problem. You don't have the money to buy her a present, right?"

"Ah-ha-ha... It's embarrassing, but yeah, that's exactly it."

"Say no more. I have just the thing for you!" she exclaimed, folding her arms and grinning cheerfully.

"Really?! Please tell me about it!"

"Sure thing! You'll be rolling in money if you enter this!"

She tore a poster off the bulletin board and slapped it down on the table. I took the slightly crumpled paper and quickly read it over.

"The...Sword Fighting Festival?"

The Sword Fighting Festival was a celebration held for swordfighters once a month in the neighboring town of Orvis. It was called a festival, but it wasn't the fun and lively gathering with stalls set up everywhere that that word suggested.

Instead, it was an event where skilled swordsmen gathered to compete and show their prowess with the blade by performing in one-on-one duels. I'd heard that the top three winners were presented with a sizable amount of prize money.

"I suppose real men have to earn a living with their strength!" she said, clapping her arm, which was over three times thicker than mine.

"Hmm..."

The old me from 1.5 billion years ago would never have considered entering this tournament.

As I am now, though...even if placing first is difficult, I should be able to put up a good fight.

However, there was one major problem preventing me from entering the Sword Fighting Festival.

"That's a good idea, but...the entrance fee..."

An entrance fee of one thousand guld was required to enter the

tournament. Unfortunately, I didn't have that kind of money right now. Feeling like I had no choice, I tried to return the poster to Ms. Paula.

"You dummy! Do you really think I'm the kind of matron who would cheap out on lending money when one of my residents is trying to make a name for himself?"

She took a one-thousand-guld bill off a shelf and shoved it into my hands.

"Take this!"

"A-are you sure?!"

"Of course I am! You'll pay me back by doing your absolute best, okay?"

"Thank you so much! I promise I'll win and get some prize money!"

"Now that's the spirit I want to see!"

I devoted myself to training for the rest of the day. I hadn't expected to enter this tournament, but now that I was, I would give my all to win a top prize.



A few days later, I walked to the neighboring town of Orvis to enter the Sword Fighting Festival.

"It shouldn't be far now..."

I was searching for the venue using a map that Ms. Paula had given me.

"This restaurant is right here...so I should turn right at the next corner."

I rounded the corner and inhaled in shock.

"Holy..."

I saw a large crowd of burly swordsmen, their eyes practically shining with excitement.

A-are you serious...?

They had bulging muscles and boulder-like fists, and they were clearly experienced. All it took was one glance to tell they were far more advanced than me.

I was way too optimistic about my chances...

Not in my wildest dreams would I have thought that the level of talent in the Sword Fighting Festival was this high.

Overwhelmed, I stood frozen for a moment, then remembered something I needed to take care of.

"Oh yeah, I need to complete my entry registration..."

I was standing there, looking for the reception desk, when someone bumped into me from behind.

"Oops," came the voice behind me.

I turned around to see a large man over 198 centimeters tall with a flattop haircut towering over me. He wore a look of displeasure on his face. The sword across his back clearly indicated that he intended to enter the Sword Fighting Festival.

“What the hell are you doing standing around in the middle of a crowd, you stupid brat?!” he shouted angrily.

The three women who were following him around looked at me and snickered.

“Come on, Bobble, there’s no need to bully helpless little kids.”

“Look, he has a sword at his hip. Does he mean to enter, too?”

“No way! A skinny boy like him couldn’t possibly hope to compete.”

They all cackled.

I was more than a little offended. It was this Bobble guy who had bumped into me in the first place. Though I was standing out of the way on the edge of the street, he was too focused speaking to these women to pay attention to what was in front of him. The fault obviously lay with him.

Most of all, I didn’t think I had done anything in the seconds since we’d met to warrant those insults.

“...Whoa, is that defiance I see in your eyes? Are you lookin’ to scrap with the mighty Bobble?” he jeered, cracking his knuckles as veins bulged on his head. It seemed that my emotion was showing on my face.

I gave my response some thought.

“...Sorry.”

I decided to back down and apologize. Causing trouble here risked being barred from the tournament. That would be betraying Ms. Paula after she went out of her way to lend me money for the entrance fee, and I couldn’t live with that.

“Huh? You don’t even have a comeback? Little wimp,” he snarled pointedly before disappearing into the crowd.

“Haaah...” I sighed.

That was terrible. My luck was really against me today if I was immediately having guys like him pick fights with me.

Forget about him.

It was a big world. For every nice person like Ms. Paula, there were weirdos like Bobble. I had no need to waste time worrying about his ilk.

“Let’s see, where’s registration...? Over there.”

I looked around to find a large line directly in front of the festival venue.

There was a signboard in front of it that read SWORD FIGHTING FESTIVAL REGISTRATION. That was what I was looking for. I got in the back of the line and waited for my turn.

“Next person, please.”

About ten minutes later, my turn finally arrived.

A beautiful girl with blond hair smiled as she efficiently went through the registration process.

“Good morning. Do you wish to enter the Sword Fighting Festival?”

“Yes, please.”

“Okay, that will be one thousand guld for your entrance fee.”

Thanking Ms. Paula internally, I took the thousand-guld bill out of my coin purse.

“Thank you very much. Can I have your name and the school of swordcraft you belong to?”

“My name is Allen Rodol. My school of swordcraft is, uh...”

I faltered. I hadn’t expected her to ask me that.

“Allen...Rodol. What style of swordcraft were you taught?”

...She asked me a second time. It seemed like I had no choice but to answer this question.

“U-um...I don’t have one. I’m self-taught...I guess,” I mumbled, trailing off from embarrassment.

“Pfft... S-self-taught... Okay. U-understood...,” the receptionist noted, choking back a laugh as she filled out my registration with a shaking hand.

Nearly all swordsmen belonged to some school of swordcraft. The only ones who didn’t were either eccentrics or people too weak to handle a school, so anyone self-taught was always regarded as a failure.

I couldn’t blame her for laughing at the idea of a self-taught person entering a tournament full of skilled swordsmen. When my registration was completed, I let out a small sigh.

Haaah... I want to melt into the floor...

That was indescribably embarrassing, and in an entirely different way from being laughed at by my classmates.

...That’s enough thinking about that. I need to move on and focus on the tournament.

I still had about thirty minutes before it started.

“All right, I guess I should get in some practice swings.”

I found a vacant spot and swung my sword alone in silence.



The Sword Fighting Festival was set to begin in five minutes. I headed toward the venue to attend the opening ceremony.

The site for the tournament was bare-bones—it consisted only of a stone stage surrounded by spectator seating.

On stage, the manager of the festival was explaining the rules of the

tournament while the crowd of participating swordsmen listened quietly.

The format for the matches would be one-on-one duels. A participant was defeated once they were knocked off the stage. Lethal attacks were forbidden. The matchups were determined directly before each bout through a lottery. Those were the only rules—it couldn't have been much more straightforward.

Once he finished his explanation, the Sword Fighting Festival was finally ready to begin.

“Without further ado, I will now draw the names for the first match!”

A woman serving as the announcer drew two names out of a large box.

“The first match is—Bobbie Domingo vs Allen Rodol! Please make your way to the stage!”

“...I'm going first?”

I would've rather watched a few fights beforehand to get a sense for the fighting styles of these swordsmen...but there was nothing I could do about it now. I made my way through the crowd and stepped onto the stage.

“Get outta here! It's the wimp from earlier! I can't believe you actually entered the tournament!” Bobbie exclaimed with a mocking smile.

I knew it was a possibility, but what are the odds I'd end up fighting the giant man who bumped into me earlier...?

After I ignored his provocation, the announcer started reading from a piece of paper.

“Wow, according to my information, Bobbie belongs to the famous Vajra School of Swordcraft! It's a legendary and refined style that uses a greatsword to pulverize opponents with powerful attacks. Shifting to Allen, he's... *Pfft*. Wh-what...? It appears that Allen is self-taught! He's a self-taught swordsman!”

The stands suddenly grew loud. It didn't take a genius to figure out I was being ridiculed.

“Gah-ha-ha-ha! The lottery was kind to you today, Bobbie, you lucky bastard! Finish him off quick!”

“Hey, kid! Make sure you don't get stepped on!”

“Ha-ha-ha... Show us what that self-taught sword is capable of!”

Bobbie was no exception, of course.

“Hey now, give me a break! Fighting a self-taught swordsman—and a small kid at that—is straight-up bullying! Gwa-ha-ha-ha!”

He held his belly in an exaggerated gesture and roared with laughter.

I hated to admit it, but nothing they were saying was wrong.

I had definitely gotten stronger. However, that was only in comparison with the talent at Grand Swordcraft Academy. All it took was one step into the outside world to see that there was an abundance of swordsmen more skilled than me.

I still have a long way to go...

It was a big world. Even if that was the only lesson I took from this, entering the Sword Fighting Festival would be worth it.

This was a good chance to fight against someone better than me. I was going to give it my all.

“Good luck.”

I bowed my head slightly toward Bobble and waited for the signal to start the duel.

No matter how rude a person is, you need to show them a certain amount of respect. Otherwise, you'll be no different from them. That was something Mom taught me.

Bobble and I took our starting positions.

“Are you both ready? The first match starts—now!”

As soon as the announcer declared the start of the match, we both drew our weapons.

I took the middle stance, holding my sword in front of my navel. Bobble held his above his head.

Time to see just how much I grew as a swordsman over the billion-plus years I spent in that world!

I wouldn't learn anything from being passive. I needed to fight aggressively and draw as much from my skill with the sword as I could.

That was why I decided to strike first this time. I quickly swung my sword down from the middle stance.

“First Style—Flying Shadow!”

This was a flying slash attack I had learned over my billion years of training. It had only moderate strength, but it was quick, and it was handy because I could use it from a distance. That made it an ideal move for containing an opponent.

Okay, how's he going to react?

Bobble showed no sign of movement in the face of my approaching slash attack.

I see... He's going to wait until the slash is about to hit him and then block it with minimal movement.

Despite his rudeness, I knew he would be better than me as a swordsman.

Then something unexpected happened.

“Blargh?!”

Flying Shadow hit Bobble directly and easily knocked him off the stage.

“...Huh?”

As I stood there in confusion, the announcer loudly declared the winner of the match.

“W-we have a winner! Allen Rodol! What in the world did we just witness? This small swordsman just shocked all of us by ending the match in one strike!”

The spectators and the other participants couldn’t believe what they had just seen.

“Wh-what just happened?”

“Did anyone just see something fly at him? It was faster than lightning!”

“I—I didn’t see that at all!”

I stood there dumbfounded at how abruptly our duel had ended.

“D-did that just happen?”

Perhaps I’d become significantly stronger than I’d thought.



After Bobble’s match, the committee members of the Sword Fighting Festival started scrambling around as if someone had poked a beehive.

Their panic was understandable. The chairwoman of one of the Elite Five Academies, Thousand Blade Academy, had arrived unannounced. Her name was Reia Lasnote.

“I—I am honored beyond words that you would grace our Sword Fighting Festival with your presence!”

The manager of the festival, a man nearing old age, managed to string together words of gratitude despite his extremely flustered state.

Reia scratched her cheek, looking slightly guilty.

“You didn’t have to go out of your way to prepare a VIP seat for me. I would have been fine with a regular seat.”

She truly meant that. She had come here as a simple spectator in order to observe the Sword Fighting Festival. Only after a committee member happened to catch sight of her was she hounded into the VIP section.

“I will not hear it! You must be treated with your due respect. I am terribly sorry we cannot prepare something more suitable for you!” the man apologized in earnest, utterly ashamed.

The manager was acting this way for good reason. The chairs of each of the Elite Five Academies held enormous societal influence and tremendous political power. If he happened to offend Reia somehow, she could easily have had the Sword Fighting Festival shut down permanently.

As such, his behavior was not surprising in the least.

“There’s no need to humble yourself. I only came to watch the Sword Fighting Festival—to see the participants especially.”

She decided to chat with the committee members a little to get them to relax. After all, she didn’t want to watch the matches with such a tense atmosphere hanging over her.

“I’ve been traveling around lately with the goal of bringing Thousand Blade Academy to greater heights. I guess you could call it scouting.”

Thousand Blade Academy used to be extremely prestigious, but in recent years, the quality of its students had decreased. It was even in jeopardy of losing its status as one of the Elite Five Academies.

The previous chairman had resigned to take responsibility for the falling grades, and Reia had become the new chairwoman after the election held this year. With the ultimate goal of returning the academy to its former glory, she toured the regions to observe promising swordsmen and offer them scholarships to attend the academy free from all school fees.

Improving the quality of the current student body right away would be difficult. That was why she was recruiting the most elite of elite students to bring in new talent.

“I see! Then are you here to see the winner of the previous festival, the Bounty Hunter?” the manager asked her, having now calmed down a little.

“Yes, of course. I want to see this Bounty Hunter, Rose Valencia, with my own eyes.”

If she was as strong as the rumors suggested, Reia would offer her a full ride right away.

“I had a feeling. I watched the championship match last year, and let me tell you, the Cherry Blossom Blade Style she inherited is breathtaking! She’s the only person in the world who was taught its secret techniques!”

“I can’t wait to see it. I didn’t come for the Bounty Hunter alone, though.”

“...May I ask who else you have your eyes on?”

“I’m holding out a little hope that I’ll find a diamond in the rough who wasn’t on my radar,” she said, staring at the stage intently.



After defeating Bobble Domingo in one hit, I continued to advance through the tournament with the momentum of a breaking wave. I won my next five matches—something I never could’ve seen coming.

Before I knew it, I was in the finals.

The announcer began to speak. Preparations for the final match

must have been complete.

“The moment we’ve been waiting for is finally here! The championship match is about to begin! Our two finalists are Rose Valencia and Allen Rodol. Both contestants, please step onto the stage!”

I had heard of Rose Valencia, the Bounty Hunter, before. If I recalled correctly, she was a gifted swordswoman around the same age as me.

She regularly entered tournaments with prize money, took first place, and hunted down criminals with bounties on their heads to turn over to the holy knights. Her prowess with the blade was well renowned.

Rose stood on the stage in front of me. She had beautiful silver hair that was tinged with pink and extended down to her back. Her black top was accented with red fabric, and below it, she wore short black shorts. The outfit was quite revealing, greatly exposing her midriff up to the bottom of her chest.

I had watched all her fights from the spectator seating.

Though her body was a bit slender for a swordswoman, her swordplay was simply stunning as she cut down one burly man after another. In terms of pure skill, she may have been one of the best in the world.

She looks so calm for this being the championship match. It’s almost frightening.

That was probably because she had been in this situation many more times than I had.

My eyes met Rose’s, and the announcer began her spiel.



“As you all know well by this point, Rose Valencia is the sole successor of the famous secret school of swordcraft, the Cherry Blossom Blade Style! On the other side of the stage, we have Allen... who is, believe it or not, a self-taught swordsman!”

She paused for a beat after introducing our styles, then continued:

“But I can say this with confidence! There is no longer anyone here who will make light of Allen’s self-taught style!”

Just as the announcer had said, the ridicule had stopped immediately after I defeated Bobble. My image seemed to have flipped entirely. I’d even go so far as to say that it felt like everyone here respected me.

Many swordsmen had come up to me asking for a handshake, and some even requested that I take them on as a student. I granted the handshakes but rejected all applications to be my pupil. I was still young and inexperienced, so I had no business teaching anyone.

When the match was finally about to begin, I gave my usual bow.

“Good luck,” I said politely.

“Good luck to you as well,” she responded with a voice as clear as a bell.

“Are you both ready? The championship match starts...now!”

After we’d shared our pleasantries, the announcer declared the start of the match.

Rose and I quickly drew our weapons, with us both adopting the middle stance. We spent some time staring each other down.

Judging by her matches in this tournament, her fighting style is based on countering.

She used her sword defensively to stave off her opponent’s strikes and look for a window to deliver a knockout blow. I knew it would be a bad idea to attack her recklessly without a plan.

First, I’ll use Flying Shadow and see what she does.

I decided on my first move. However...

“Hwuh?!”

...Rose was suddenly right under my nose.

Did she know what I was going to do?!

She had closed the distance without making a sound in the split second it took me to draw a breath and blink.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash!”

Lowering her center of gravity, she stabbed her sword at me with all her weight. But I wasn’t so weak-minded that I would let myself fall apart from a surprise approach.

“Hah!”

Her thrust was aimed for my torso, and I matched it with a thrust at the exact same angle. This resulted in the tips of our swords colliding exactly, bringing them both to a halt.

“What the?!”

I doubted she ever could have imagined someone would counter a thrust with a thrust. She opened her eyes wide in shock, giving me a small window to attack.

I took one quick step forward to draw within a foot of her.

“Tch!”

“?!”

My perfectly timed attack only grazed her side.

She’s faster than I thought...

Despite her late reaction, she managed to twist around to avoid a direct blow. She clearly had excellent control of her body, and her reflexes were incredibly fast.

“We’re just getting started!” she yelled.

Wincing from pain, she quickly unleashed a counterattack.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Night Sakura!”

Our swords clashed again and again with great force for some time.

The venue had gotten so quiet that you could hear a pin drop. There weren’t any cheers or heckles. The spectators watched with their eyes glued to the match, save for the occasional comment.

“Good lord, he’s making the Bounty Hunter look like a child...?!”

“He’s unbelievable... I might ask him again to let me be his pupil.”

“You idiot, Master Allen doesn’t have time to waste on the likes of you.”

The longer we fought, the more injuries I inflicted on Rose’s body.

“Haaah...haaah... Who the hell...taught you to fight?!”

“I, uh...I’m really self-taught...”

Being self-taught was nothing to brag about. I really didn’t want to keep repeating it.

“Don’t lie to me! Your sword clearly carries generations of diligent experimentation and study!” she declared, piercing me with her glare.

Sh-she’s really perceptive...

Rose was right—my sword was imbued with over one billion years of training. But there was no way I could tell her that.

“It’s, uh...probably just your imagination,” I responded, averting my eyes. I didn’t really want to bring up the 100-Million-Year Button. There was no way anyone would believe something as absurd as that.

“You’re intent on playing dumb, I see...”

She looked irritated by my answer.

“As the sole inheritor of the Cherry Blossom Blade Style, I will win this match!”

Rose pointed her sword toward me, the air around her clearly changing as she did so. She looked as sharp as a drawn sword and beautiful enough to take one’s breath away.

It was as if she herself had transformed into a blade.

“Let’s do this, Allen Rodol!” she shouted.

“Give me your best shot...!” I responded.

She dashed toward me with incredible speed.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Secret Technique—Mirror Sakura Slash!”

She unleashed a blitz of eight attacks, four from the left and four from the right, each one seeming to mirror the last.

Huh?!

I was captivated for a moment by the elegance of her attack, which was reminiscent of a blizzard of cherry blossoms.

As her furious slashes drew near, I realized something. This move was not one attack, but rather a chain of eight separate attacks—there was a minuscule gap between each slash of her sword.

Once I had confirmed that, I faced her and loosed an attack of my own.

“Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!”

I performed eight slash attacks with one swing of my sword. There was no gap at all between each slash, making it a genuine eight-slash strike.

Despite beginning my attack a moment after hers, my Eight-Span Crow skill easily overpowered her Mirror Sakura Slash.

“I-impossible!”

With the failure of her secret technique, Rose was left completely defenseless.

“You’re finished.”

Not letting the opportunity go to waste, I struck her quickly with a downward diagonal slash.

“Gah...”

She dropped to her knees and collapsed face forward.

The venue went dead silent until the announcer loudly declared the winner.

“W-we have a winner! Allen Roooooodol!”

The crowd roared with deafening applause.

I was decorated as the champion of the Sword Fighting Festival and granted the hefty prize money of one hundred thousand guld.



Two days had passed since the Sword Fighting Festival.

I was swinging my sword in the schoolyard as per usual when an announcement was broadcast throughout the academy.

“Allen Rodol of Class 3-B, please come to the principal’s office right away. Allen Rodol of Class 3-B...”

I had a bad feeling about this.

I wonder if this is about those rumors.

There were totally unfounded rumors going around that I had used a concealed weapon or some other kind of cowardly trick to win my duel against Dodriel. I obviously hadn't done anything untoward, but the academy had always wanted to get rid of me. I didn't think they would care if it were the truth or not.

The academy may have received some pressure from Dodriel's family. House Barton was a barony, after all.

They're probably going to expel me this time...

I let out a big sigh and started to head for the principal's office.

No, I shouldn't think about it that way. My grades are already the worst in the academy by far. It was only a matter of time before I got driven out due to poor performance anyway.

Even if my duel with Dodriel hadn't happened, I probably would've been expelled sooner or later.

At least I was able to get a little stronger with the help of the 100-Million-Year Button.

If I was strong enough to win the Sword Fighting Festival, I could probably get hired by the region's organization of holy knights.

Working as a holy knight would give me a steady monthly salary. In turn, I would be able to give Mom an easy life to pay her back for all the hard work she'd done for me.

That's definitely an option...

Lost in thought, I arrived at the principal's office before I knew it.

I knocked on the slightly imposing door, and it swung open immediately.

"Hey, Allen! We've been waiting for you!" exclaimed the vice-principal, cheerily clapping me on the shoulders.

The vice-principal is here, too...

There was no doubt about it now. The day of my expulsion had finally arrived.

"What are we doing standing around? Come on in!"

"...Yes, sir."

The vice-principal led me into the room, where I was greeted by the equally cheerful principal.

"Allen, my boy! I'm glad you came! Please sit down. Would you like some sweets? You can have as many as you like!" he insisted.

"Th-thank you...?"

For some reason, they were both in an excellent mood.

They typically avoid me like the plague. What's going on here?

The confusion on my face must have been evident.

"The reason we've called you here is because you've received a scholarship from an academy!" he announced excitedly.

"A...scholarship?"

"Yes! From one of the prestigious Elite Five Academies—Thousand

Blade Academy!”

Even I had heard of Thousand Blade Academy. It was such a famous establishment that I doubted there were any swordfighters who hadn’t.

There were four levels of swordcraft academies—elementary school, middle school, high school, and university. Grand Swordcraft Academy was a middle school attended by students from ages thirteen to fifteen. Thousand Blade Academy was a high school that instructed students from ages sixteen to eighteen.

“Producing a student who moved on to one of the Elite Five Academies is an incredible accomplishment for a rural academy like ours!”

“I don’t know why they asked for you, Allen, but I don’t care if it was a mistake or not! This will be huge for Grand Swordcraft Academy!”

They were both beside themselves with excitement.

“Well done, Allen!”

“This is the excellence I expect from our students! You’ve really made us proud!”

“H-huh...”

As they tightly gripped my hands and shoulders, I could only muster a half-hearted reply.

“I’ve always thought if anyone could achieve this, it would be you. From the very beginning, I expected only the best from you!”

“Oh yeah! We should have you present the graduates with a formal address! You’ll be named top of the class, of course!”

They continued to heap on the praise.

I watched them both coldly.

They always blatantly ignored the bullying I suffered... Then I receive a scholarship offer from Thousand Blade Academy, and they immediately start treating me like a superstar.

It seemed like they wanted to get me to accept that offer, no matter what it took.

I was sure it would give Grand Swordcraft Academy some prestige.

But whether or not I should take this scholarship was not a decision I could make on my own.

“Sorry, but can I have some time to think about it?” I asked.

“Wh-what could you possibly have to think about?”

“Do you mean to reject their offer?!”

They both leaned toward me with shock on their faces.

“I could go to Thousand Blade Academy, but I might want to get a job as a holy knight or a spellblade instead. I am honestly unable to decide right now.”

This was a very important choice that would significantly affect the

rest of my life.

“I need to return to my hometown and talk to my mom first. I can’t give you an answer right away.”

I figured it would be a good idea to talk to Mom at length before deciding my future.

“D-do you know what you’re saying?! You can’t seriously mean to waste a chance to attend the famous Thousand Blade Academy?!”

“You can easily become a high-ranking holy knight if you graduate from one of the Elite Five Academies! A successful career would be all but guaranteed!”

“...I’m sorry. I can’t decide right now.”

They continued to pester me for some time to get me to commit to Thousand Blade Academy, but I insisted on my refusal. In the end, they gave in and said they would wait for me to make the right decision.

“...Excuse me,” I announced, getting up to leave.

I was greeted by a crowd of teachers when I entered the hallway. I didn’t know if they were here because the principal had summoned them, or simply because they heard the broadcast.

“Allen! I always knew you had special talent! What do you say to joining my Divine Spirit School of Swordcraft?”

“No, my Vacuum School of Swordcraft would fit him better. How about it, Allen? I’ll give you the special post of assistant instructor!”

“Get real, you two! A gifted duelist like him obviously belongs in my Wind Moon School of Swordcraft!”

These were the same teachers who rejected me out of hand when I entered the academy as a first-year and asked each of them to take me into their school of swordcraft.

They had clearly already heard about the scholarship offer I’d received to attend Thousand Blade Academy. These teachers had always pushed me away with open distaste whenever I asked them earnest questions about swordplay, but now they were all trying to cozy up to me.

Guess this is how fast a reputation can change...

They were probably hounding me like this because they wanted to be able to brag to people that a pupil of their school of swordcraft got into the famed Thousand Blade Academy.

In other words, they simply wanted to use me as a tool to attract applicants.

“...Sorry. Excuse me.”

“Wait, Allen! Let’s at least talk...!”

I quickly pushed my way through the crowd of teachers and walked toward the dorm alone.

Geez... Well, I’ll return to Goza Village this weekend to talk to Mom and

decide what to do from there.

I felt like I had seen too much of the ugly side of humanity today. Wanting to cleanse myself by talking to warm and genuine people like Mom and Ms. Paula, I headed back to the dorm.



A few days later—the academy was off for two days in a row, so I decided I would go ahead and visit Mom.

I had already finished my morning routine and eaten breakfast. Now I just needed to grab my luggage and leave.

“All right, I’m ready. Bye, Ms. Paula,” I called out from the dorm’s entrance. She poked her head out from the kitchen.

“Have you forgotten anything? You have the present you bought, right?” she asked.

“Yes, I have everything.”

I’d wrapped the *senbei* I bought at a street stall the previous day in nice wrapping paper that Ms. Paula had given me.

“Good. Be careful on your trip, okay?”

“I will!”

I bobbed my head toward her and left the dorm. My championship trophy from the Sword Fighting Festival was being displayed prominently in the entrance to the dorm... I found it a little embarrassing.

After leaving Ms. Paula’s dorm, I headed south along a lengthy forest trail.

I ran for one, two, three hours, until Goza Village finally came into view. The trip normally would have taken me about ten hours, but this time, it passed by in a flash.

“Ah, this really brings back memories...”

Thatch-roofed houses sparsely dotted the landscape, surrounded by sprawling pastures and cultivated land. It was a very small village with a population of less than one hundred people.

“It’s been three whole years since I was last here...”

Even if I didn’t count the billion-plus years I spent in the World of Time, it had been a while since my previous trip home.

“Heh? Allen, is that you?”

As I stood there taking in the scenery, I heard an elderly voice with a southern accent from behind me.

I turned around to see Ol’ Bamboo, an old man who used to let me play with stilts and handmade cards.

“Ol’ Bamboo! Long time no see!”

“Well, I’ll be darned! You’ve gotten so much bigger since I last laid eyes on ya!”

Goza Village was located in the south of the Liengard Empire, and the people here had a strong southern accent.

“Ah-ha-ha, I am in my growing years.”

We spent a while reminiscing about old times.

“Now you get yerself on over to Ms. Rodol’s place, okay? She ain’t been the same since you left.”

“Okay, I will. It was nice to see you, Ol’ Bamboo.”

“Same to you. Feel free to stahp by later! How ’bout a game o’ cards, fer old times’ sake?”

“That would be great!”

After parting with him, I walked down a road smelling of livestock until I arrived at my mom’s house.

“Man, I’ve missed this place...”

It looked exactly the same as it did when I last saw it three years ago. Not a thing had changed.

“Mom, I’m home!”

I slid open the rattly old door, which had been left unlocked, and called out to Mom. I immediately heard footsteps race toward me from within the house.

“A-Allen?!”

Mom was holding a potlid, and her eyes were shining. It looked like she had been preparing dinner.

“Hello, Mom!”

“Mah goodness... You’ve grown so much!”

She opened her arms wide and pulled me into a tight embrace.

“It’s been so lawng, Allen! How’ve ya been?!”

“I’m doing great, Mom.”

“That warms mah heart to hear! Don’t just stand there; come on in!”

I caught up with Mom as she made dinner. When she had a free moment, I brought up the main topic I wanted to speak with her about.

“...Hey, Mom. Can I talk to you about something important?”

“Is something the matter, sweetheart? You looked troubled.”

“Well...”

I began to lay out the choices my future held in store. I told her about my three options—becoming a holy knight, becoming a spellblade, or attending Thousand Blade Academy—and I explained the pros and cons of each. Once I finished giving her the big picture, Mom surprised me by casually shrugging.

“Oh, Allen... That’s not so difficult as you made it out to be. Why were you worryin’ over sumthin’ that simple?”

“N-no, this is a really difficult decision—”

“You want to go to Thousand Blade Academy, right?”

“...”

She'd deduced it so easily, even though I hadn't revealed so much as a word of my thoughts on the situation.

"H-how did you know?"

"Call it a mother's intuition. You've loved swingin' yer sword since before you were yea big. It ain't hard to figure you're itchin' to go to Thousand Blade Academy."

"...Oh."

I fell silent, and Mom spoke to me gently.

"You don't need to worry yerself over me. You just live yer life. I'll be cheerin' you on all the while. Just promise me one thing—that you'll outlast me, even if it's only by one second. There's nothin' better you can do fer yer mother than that."

"...Okay. Thanks, Mom."

She grinned.

"If that's all you have to say, then let's go ahead and eat! I made a large helpin' of the stew you always loved!" she announced.

She poured some fresh soup containing large potato chunks onto a wooden plate. This was a special stew that she used to make exclusively on my birthday.

"It's delicious!" I exclaimed.

This was the first time I'd had her stew in over a billion years. I couldn't begin to describe how delicious it was.

"Glad to hear it! There's plenty more, so help yerself to seconds!"

After I had my fill of the stew, she prepared a nostalgic steam bath for me. I told her I could get the heat going myself, but she insisted that "it's a parent's duty to go overboard for their children," so I had to keep quiet and let her do it, as though I had become a small child again. It wasn't a bad feeling. There was one thing weighing on my mind, however.

"Mom has really aged..."

She looked a lot older than she did the last time I saw her.

She's turning fifty this year, so I guess there's nothing unusual about that...

Not only did she have more wrinkles and white hair, but I also felt like she'd gotten a little shorter, too.

"...I need to train hard at Thousand Blade Academy and become a skilled swordsman as fast as I can."

That would enable me to make a lot of money and give Mom an easy life.

With my determination renewed, I washed my exhaustion away in the bath.



While Allen was in the bath, his mother, Daria Rodol, was in the kitchen doing the dishes.

Amid the sound of the running water and the dishes being placed on the drainboard, she heard a hoarse, elderly voice.

“Hyo-hoh-hoh! This stew is magnificent!”

Daria turned around to see an old man with a crooked back by the table. It was the Time Hermit.

Suddenly, he was sitting at the table with a plate of stew and a spoon in his hand, as if someone had served him.

“The Seal had loosened, so I had my suspicions, but...turns out it really was you, Time Hermit.”

Daria had dropped her southern accent and instead spoke with a perfect standard dialect.

“You sure did hide it well, though... Finding it put a real strain on these old bones of mine,” he responded.

“Oh really? I’ll break a few of those bones for you!”

Daria circled behind him in a flash and swung her fist down at his head, but he turned his body transparent and easily avoided her blow. Her fist passed through thin air before hitting the wooden chair and smashing it to pieces.

“Hyo-hoh! My oh my, how frightening!”

Calm as could be, the Time Hermit grabbed a large potato and tossed it into his mouth.

“Mm, this really is the best food I’ve had in ages. Until next time,” he said, disappearing into the air like fog.

“...Crap, he ran.”

Daria clicked her tongue in frustration.

“Hey, I felt something here... Don’t tell me it was him?!”

Ol’ Bamboo barged through the front door, also speaking a perfect standard dialect.

“You’re late. If you’re after the Time Hermit, he’s already left.”

“Dammit! Does that mean...?”

“Yes. It appears the 100-Million-Year Button has been used...”

“You can’t be serious...”

They both fell into a grave mood.

“Hey, Daria... How did the Time Hermit learn of Allen’s existence? The Seal was perfect, wasn’t it?”

“It’s possible there was some incident that provoked a strong emotional response in Allen... He told me he was having fun at school in his last letter, so I wasn’t worried about him...”

Allen hadn’t told his mother that he was being bullied at school. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust her; he simply didn’t want to make her worry.

“At any rate, it seems that the Time Hermit is doing whatever he

can to get in *our* way,” she seethed, clenching her fists tight. “But this time, I won’t let him get what he wants.”

Later, Ol’ Bamboo returned to his house, and Daria threw the broken chair into the garbage outside.



After returning to Goza Village and consulting with Mom, I decided to accept the scholarship from Thousand Blade Academy. Upon doing so, however, I learned something unexpected.

Apparently, the offer to attend the academy didn’t mean that I was automatically accepted. I was exempt from the written and practical entrance exams, but I would need to do an interview to determine if I was qualified.

Hearing about this made me feel nervous at first, but the principal told me he’d never heard of anyone failing it. That made me feel a little better.

Today was the day of my evaluation at Thousand Blade Academy. I hadn’t received any instructions for what to wear, so I decided to go in my Grand Swordcraft Academy uniform.

“There are so many people here...”

This was my first time in Aurst, the capital of this country. Though my head was spinning from the extraordinarily busy streets and the great number of modern buildings, I was somehow able to find the front gate of Thousand Blade Academy.

“Phew, I made it. Thank goodness...”

It was a quarter to five in the afternoon. I’d arrived fifteen minutes before my interview—perfect timing.

I showed the guards at the gate my exam admission ticket and was let into the academy.

The interview was to be conducted in the innermost reception room on the third floor of the Third Building.

The Third Building is...this one.

Entering the designated building, I climbed the staircase and gasped when I emerged onto the third floor.

Wh-what the heck?!

The floor was packed with students here to take the entrance examinations. Judging by their ragged states and bloody clothes, they were clearly general-entry students who had already begun their exams.

That’s crazy...

I’d heard that the entrance exams for all the Elite Five Academies were harsh, but...it looked like they were much more difficult than I’d imagined.

I decided to hunch down and sit in a chair in the hallway so I wouldn't stand out.

"Wait, look at him! Did the guy who just came in get through that insane test without a single scratch?!"

"I can't believe it... I wonder what famous swordcraft academy he's from?"

"I've never seen those clothes before, but he has to be extremely skilled."

For reasons unknown, everyone turned to look at me.

Wh-why are they staring at me?!

They were all watching and speaking in low whispers.

I'm not sure, but I'll pretend that I haven't noticed them...

While feeling extremely uncomfortable, I sat still and waited until my name was called. It took about five minutes.

"Examinee number 723, Allen Rodol, please report to your interview room. Examinee number 723, Allen Rodol, please..."

Thanks to the broadcast, I was finally able to escape the gazes of the other students. I immediately stood up and went to the reception room at the end of the hall.

Uh... I was supposed to knock three times, right?

I took a deep breath and tried to remember what I read in my interview prep book. Trying to calm myself down, I wiped my sweaty hands on my clothes.

Then I knocked three times and slowly opened the door.

"Excuse me."

Three interviewers were seated inside, and a single empty stool sat opposite to them.

The interview began as soon as I sat down.

"The interview will now begin. First, tell us your examination number and name."

"M-my number is 723, and my name is Allen Rodol," I answered.

A different interviewer asked me the next question.

"Please tell me about a strength of yours."

"A strength... I'd say my endurance."

That was the first thing that popped into my mind.

"Interesting answer... Can you describe your endurance in greater detail?"

"Let's see... I have the endurance to continue swinging my sword for over one billion years."

"O-one billion? That's, uh, very impressive..."

"Yes, it was a trying experience."

Training for even a single one-hundred-million-year period really was a ridiculous thing to do. If I were given the chance to do it again, I would hesitate to accept. Unless you learned to suppress your

emotions, it was a truly grueling experience.

“N-now... Could you tell us about a weakness of yours?”

“Hmm... I can be reckless. Had I thought before acting at *that moment*... No, there’s no point going over what-ifs. I don’t regret what I did that day.”

When the Time Hermit asked me to *push* the 100-Million-Year Button, I did so without any thought. But I wouldn’t be who I was today without that opportunity. That exhibited both a strength and a weakness of mine.

“H-huh... ‘That day’...?”

“Yes.”

“...”

“...”

As if they needed time to think about their next question, the interviewers fell silent for a moment.

“W-well...moving on. Please tell us your school of swordcraft, then get up and demonstrate your best move on the dummy placed behind you.”

“Uh, this is embarrassing, but I’m self-taught. I do have some moves, though, so I suppose I can show you one.”

I stood up, drew my sword, and faced the dummy behind me. Taking a deep breath, I quickly flourished my blade.

“Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!”

Eight slashes raced through the air in an instant, successfully slicing the dummy into eight pieces.

“Huh...?!”

“He slashed eight times with one attack...?!”

“How original. I’ve never seen anything like it...!”

The examiners each reacted distinctly. It was safe to say the response was generally positive.

Awesome, looks like I was right to choose the flashy Eight-Span Crow.

I sheathed my sword and sat back down.

“Th-thank you very much. That concludes the interview. We will send you a letter within a few days informing you of the result, so please keep an eye out for it. Have a nice rest of your day.”

And so my interview drew to a close.

“Thank you very much.”

I thanked them and left the room, then went down the stairs and exited the building. When I passed through the front gate, I finally stopped to catch my breath.

“*Phew*, it’s over...”

That was really nerve-racking, but I thought I was able to answer all the questions just fine. I didn’t make any major mistakes, either. Plus, I was sure my last move made a great impression.

That's all I can do for now. All that remains is to pray.
Feeling confident, I returned to Ms. Paula's dorm.



An uneasy mood filled the interview room after Allen left.

"He was certainly a...unique student. Everything he said flew over my head. I know he received a scholarship offer, but can we really pass him?"

"I didn't have a clue about what he was saying, either...but his recommendation came directly from Chairwoman Reia. We can't possibly fail him ourselves..."

"Hmm, if he was able to obtain a move like *that* through self-training, I'm sure he would improve dramatically with a proper instructor... Though, to tell you the truth, I also didn't understand a word out of his mouth."

The interviewers were all in agreement on one point: They had no idea what Allen had been talking about.



A few days later, I received a letter from Thousand Blade Academy. It was probably the results of my interview. No, it definitely was. This was the moment of truth... I felt so nervous, I thought my heart was going to explode.

"Okay..."

After a number of deep breaths, I carefully opened the envelope. Inside was a piece of paper with one giant word written on it.

"...Pass."

I'd passed.

"Yes!!!"

It might have been a given that I would pass because of my scholarship, but this was still an extremely happy moment.

I can't believe I'll actually be going to the famous Thousand Blade Academy... This is like a dream come true!

Just one month ago, I was still being ridiculed as the Reject Swordsman... Life really was unpredictable.

I dashed out of my room to share the news with Ms. Paula.

"Ms. Paula, I did it! I got into Thousand Blade Academy!"

"R-really?!"

She had been preparing lunch, but she quickly stopped.

"Yes! Look at this!"

I handed her my certificate.

“This is amazing! Congratulations, Allen! I know your mom back home will be delighted! I am too, of course!”

Ms. Paula looked as happy as if she had gotten in herself.

“This calls for something special. I’ll make a feast for dinner tonight. We need to celebrate your acceptance!”

“Thank you!”

I wasted no time in sending Mom a letter, and that night, Ms. Paula and I had a grand party with the food she made.

The graduation ceremony for Grand Swordcraft Academy was held a few weeks later. Afterward, the big moment finally arrived.

Ms. Paula came to see me off when I carried my luggage to the entrance of the dorm. I bowed to her deeply.

“Thank you so much for the last three years, Ms. Paula.”

Thousand Blade Academy was a boarding school, so students couldn’t live off campus without a special reason. That meant today was my final day with Ms. Paula and the dorm where I had lived for three whole years.

“Oh, Allen. You’re being overly dramatic. It’s not like we’re saying good-bye forever! You don’t have to make a big deal out of this.”

She was being lighthearted, but I wanted to make sure she understood how grateful I was.

“I can’t thank you enough, Ms. Paula. You let me stay here, even though I was flat broke... You woke me up every morning, you made me delicious food, you gave me advice whenever something was bothering me, and you were always fun to talk to. Thank you for everything!”

Bowing my head, all my pent-up gratitude flooded out of me at once.

“Oh, I’m so embarrassed! I’ve become such an easy crier with age...” She sniffled, rubbing her eyes. “Feel free to come back any time you’re hungry! I’d be happy to cook for you again!”

“I will! Thank you!”

Her food was exquisite. I was sure I would remember the mouthwatering and savory flavors for as long as I lived.

“Well...I need to get going.”

“I don’t remember if it’s Hundred Blade Academy or Thousand Blade Academy, but you make sure to take that campus by storm!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Thus, I graduated from being the Reject Swordsman at Grand Swordcraft Academy and entered one of the Elite Five Academies, Thousand Blade Academy.

CHAPTER 3

The Black and White Princess & Soul Attire

After parting with Ms. Paula, I headed to my dorm room at Thousand Blade Academy. They'd already mailed me the key to my room, and I had it carefully tucked away in my pocket.

"Here it is... 501."

I found my apartment and used the key to open the door.

"Whoa, this is way bigger than I expected."

It was a single-room, nine-square-meter apartment, plenty spacious enough for one person to live in comfortably. The bathroom was sparkling clean, and the tub was large enough for me to stretch my legs in.

It was even furnished with all the basic household appliances, including a refrigerator and a washing machine. The location was also excellent. Thousand Blade Academy had constructed the dorm, so the main campus was only a few minutes away by foot.

"This is everything I could want."

Thousand Blade Academy wasn't one of the Elite Five Academies for nothing. They provided all their students with these accommodations, which must have taken an enormous amount of wealth.

"I should get changed."

I pulled my Thousand Blade Academy uniform out of some wrapping paper and changed into it. Then I stood in front of a full-length mirror to make sure everything was in order.

"All right, looks good."

The uniform consisted of a black shirt, a white fabric jacket accented with black and gold, a blue tie, and white pants.

On the other hand, the female students wore a uniform with a miniskirt to prioritize ease of movement.

Apparently, these outfits were both traditional and formal, and the design had not changed at all in centuries. I especially liked the school emblem, with its crossed blades on each shoulder.

“This is a really nice sword...”

After changing into my uniform, I gazed in wonder at the weapon the academy had provided me.

It was a brilliant, clear sword. The guard was an elegant gold, and the grip felt perfect in my hands. It was of significantly greater quality than the cheap thousand-guld one I had been using until now.

“Okay...there’s still a little time, but I’ll head out now.”

The entrance ceremony would begin in fifteen minutes. I felt like it was a little too early to leave, but I expected I would arrive at a decent time if I walked slowly and admired the campus.

While heading to the gymnasium, where the ceremony was being held, I happened to overhear the conversation of a few female students who were ahead of me.

“Hey, did you hear there are apparently three students who were admitted this year with a scholarship?”

“I did. It’s not fair how they got to skip that stupid hard test and get in with just the interview.”

“I know, right? They must have had some shady connection!”

...Based on that conversation, it was probably best not to tell people that I’d received a scholarship. I wanted to live at Thousand Blade Academy as a normal student and hone my sword skills in peace.

My three years at Grand Swordcraft Academy had been truly miserable. I wasn’t let into a single school of swordcraft, and the bullying prevented me from making any friends. I did not want to go through that hell again.

I wanted to study and train, make friends like anyone else, and hang out with my classmates. This time, I wanted to live the life that any student should have.

...I’ll be fine. Barring any careless slips of the tongue, no one will find out that I received a scholarship.

Anyway, this was lucky. If I hadn’t heard that conversation just now, I probably would have told someone how I got in.

This is going to be a good day!

In a cheerful mood, I headed for the entrance ceremony.



Standing in front of the gymnasium, which was being used for the entrance ceremony, a number of teachers were instructing students to enter with their shoes on. I joined the flow of students and went inside.

A plastic sheet was spread across the floor, with chairs lined on top of it in rows. There were no assigned seats, and a teacher was asking students to sit as close to the front as possible.

I followed the students before me and ended up sitting in the middle of the first row. Since no one was in front of me, I had a good view of the gymnasium's stage. It wasn't a bad seat.

I waited for a while, and then a young man walked up on stage and began testing the microphone. The entrance ceremony was about to begin.

The man onstage introduced himself as the deputy chairman and gave a simple opening statement.

"Next, the chairwoman is going to deliver a ceremonial address," he announced.

A young woman appeared from the wing of the stage. She stepped up onto a podium in the center of the stage and cleared her throat.

"Greetings, everyone. My name is Reia Lasnote, and I am the chairwoman of this academy. I am pleased to make your acquaintance," she started, bowing gracefully.

Reia Lasnote was a gorgeous young woman who appeared to be in her late twenties. Her shiny black hair extended down to her back, and her eyes were long and narrow. She was tall and cut a good figure. She was dressed in a stylish black suit, a black tie, and snug-fitting black gloves to match.

She looked like a person you could count on to get things done. Given her position as chairwoman of one of the Elite Five Academies, I was sure she was truly talented.

The chairwoman looked up slowly and began to speak.

"Congratulations to all the new students for your entry into this academy."

After reading a slightly long ceremonial address, she continued to talk about the state of the academy.

"As you all already know, this school has been in dire straits in recent years. The other Elite Five Academies have gained such a great lead on us that many are even suggesting the 'Elite Five' should be cut down to the 'Elite Four.'"

She took a brief pause.

"For that reason, we are implementing major reforms this year. We've started by completely changing the staff, starting with the previous chairman. We've also introduced the new 'Scholarship System' to ensure the entry of skilled students. I am thrilled to announce we have already gained three students through this system. They are all swordfighters I have seen with my own two eyes and judged to have transcendent skill."

A bad feeling welled up inside me.

Then Chairwoman Reia said something that plunged me into despair.

“Would the scholarship students—Lia Vesteria, Rose Valencia, and Allen Rodol—please come up to the stage?”

...It was all over. With that one request, she had just ruined my chance at a quiet student life.

A clamor rose in the gym as the students spun their heads around to find the students she called.

Maybe I can get through this unnoticed if I just sit here...

That tempting notion flashed through my mind, but I gave up on it when Chairwoman Reia beckoned me directly.

I reluctantly walked up onto the stage, where I found someone whom I recognized. She had red eyes, a dignified countenance, and long silver hair tinged with pink.

“R-Rose?!”

It was Rose Valencia, the practitioner of the Cherry Blossom Blade Style whom I’d fought in the championship match of the Sword Fighting Festival.

She waved her right hand at me when she noticed me.

“Long time no see, Allen.”

“Wh-what are you doing here?!”

“To find you, of cour... Oops, we shouldn’t talk during the ceremony. Let’s meet up later.”

“Please introduce yourselves, starting with Lia on the right. State your name and school of swordcraft, then give a brief comment.”

Chairwoman Reia passed the microphone to Lia, who stepped forward and assumed a grand pose.

“Pleasure to meet you all. My name is Lia Vesteria, and I’m an exchange student from the neighboring Vesteria Kingdom. I practice the Hegemonic School of Swordcraft. I may be royalty, but here, I’m just another student. I look forward to getting to know all of you,” she said, smiling gently.

Lia Vesteria had long blond hair tied into pigtails with red ribbons. She seemed like a kind and sociable person. Her eyes were large and bright, and her skin was white as snow; she looked just like a princess out of a fairy tale. I was surprised when she announced she was an actual princess from a neighboring country, but her dignity made it believable.

The new students all began to talk at once when she finished.

“Lia... Is she the Black and White Princess rumored to have produced Soul Attire when she was just five years old?!”

“I can’t believe she’s our classmate...”

“W-well, she didn’t earn a scholarship for nothing. Won’t these students all be as impressive as her?”

She bowed her head, and the gymnasium burst into applause.

“Thank you very much. Rose, can you please introduce yourself next?” asked the chairwoman.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She took a step forward and cleared her throat.



"I'm Rose Valencia. I practice the Cherry Blossom Blade Style. Nice to meet you."

Her self-introduction was brief and detached. Despite that, a palpable shock still raced through the crowd of new students.

"R-Rose Valencia? As in the Bounty Hunter?!"

"She's famous, too... They're really serious about turning around Thousand Blade Academy this year, aren't they?"

"She's the sole inheritor of the legendary Cherry Blossom Blade Style. I need to see her fight with my own eyes!"

Rose bowed her head slightly and also received a grand round of applause.

"Thank you very much. And last, we have Allen. Please introduce yourself as well."

"Y-yes, ma'am..."

Chairwoman Reia handed me the microphone, and I took a step forward. The expectant gazes of the new students pierced my body like sharp arrows.

...*What should I do?*

Lia Vesteria and Rose Valencia were big names and set the bar for the scholarship students impossibly high. Any self-introduction from a total nobody like me would pale disastrously in comparison.

Can I just go home...?

I was already crying internally. Yet I couldn't run. If I fled with my tail between my legs now, there was no way I would be allowed back to the academy.

I mustn't run away, I mustn't run away... I mustn't run away!

Mustering all the courage I had, I began my self-introduction.

"U-um...I'm from Grand Swordcraft Academy. My name is Allen Rodol. I'm, uh... I'm self-taught. Nice to meet you all..."

I bowed, and the gymnasium fell completely silent.

A few seconds later, the new students all began to chatter at once.

"Hold on, did he just say he's self-taught?"

"Yeah, he did. He definitely did."

"What in the world did he have to pull to get a scholarship? He should be embarrassed."

"Where's 'Grand Swordcraft Academy' anyway? Have you ever heard of it?"

"He looked scared up there. Do you think he's ever even held a sword before?"

"I understand how the last two got their scholarship, but I can't see why he was chosen."

"He must've bribed his way into the academy... I hate him already. I don't even want to look at him."

With one self-introduction, I had already become the least popular

person in school.

Good-bye to my normal student life. Hello to hell.

I grit my teeth tight so I wouldn't cry.

I...I haven't done anything wrong...

I could have never imagined that I would end up in this situation. I wanted to turn right around and go back to Ms. Paula's dorm.

After we finished our introductions, the deputy chairman gave a closing remark.

"That marks the end of the entrance ceremony. You are free to spend the rest of the day as you wish. Have a good evening."

The entrance ceremony of my nightmares was finally over.



I left the gym as soon as the entrance ceremony ended.

"Why did the chairwoman do that to me...?"

That was horrible. And so unnecessary. I was shamed in front of the entire class.

Why did I receive a scholarship in the first place? I'm nothing...

I let out a big sigh and trudged through a grove on the campus. I heard a group of new students excitedly making friends on a paved path a short distance from where I was.

...Must be nice.

I was sure they would have a fun and fulfilling three years here.

Lost in thought, I wandered deeper into the thick trees, walking until I came upon a clearing.

"I guess I'll train."

I decided to practice alone in this spot, far from the training ground.

...I'm lonely.

Though I typically enjoyed swinging my sword, I was having a hard time today. My weapon, my heart, and my soul were all weeping.

I focused solely on swinging my sword for hours. When I stopped, the sun had already sunk to the west, and the grove was lit by dim moonlight.

"Okay, I should go back."

Classes started the next day, so I thought I should go ahead and call it a day.

"Ah, but I might as well check out the bathhouse."

Practicing had calmed me down somewhat, so I decided I would try something a little adventurous.

"Let's see, the bathhouse is...this way."

I pulled a map of the academy out of my breast pocket, unfolded it, and used it to find the bathhouse.

"...Here it is."

Eventually, I arrived at a large building with a sign that read BATHHOUSE.

Ducking through the charming curtain placed over the entrance, I opened the door to the men's locker room—and saw Lia Vesteria in her underwear.

“H-huh?!”

She had just taken off her bra, giving me a glimpse of something I should not have seen. Her snow-white skin flushed red.

“S-sorry!”

Apologizing, I quickly closed the locker-room door.

My chest was throbbing, and I felt extremely guilty. I didn't know what to do.

From the other side of the door, I heard the rustling of clothes. It felt like a sound I wasn't meant to hear, so I immediately plugged my ears. I remained in that position for a while, unmoving as a statue. Then I cautiously opened the locker-room door to see Lia wearing the female uniform.

“I challenge you to a duel.”

“...What?”

“I challenge you to a duel. Do you accept?”

She delivered that question with such force that I was unable to answer right away. I had never seen a scarier face in all my life.

“U-um... I don't mind, but...what are the stakes?”

“Hmm. The loser becomes the winner's slave. How does that sound?” she asked with a wide grin. I couldn't believe my ears.

“Sl-slave?! That sounds way too harsh—”

Lia interrupted my objection by punching the wall next to me and thrusting her beautiful face directly in front of mine.

“Are we doing this or not?” she chillingly whispered in my ear.

Her knee was pinned into my groin, rendering me unable to run.

“Well? What's your answer?”

“...I accept.”

I was still unsure of why she was changing in the men's locker room, but I was in the wrong for seeing her naked. Feeling I had no choice, I nodded.

“A wise decision,” Lia said with a sadistic smile, releasing me from her hold.

What happened to the nice girl I saw at the entrance ceremony? I thought.

“I heard every word, young things!”

Chairwoman Reia pushed her way through the curtain.

“Ch-chairwoman?!”

“Reia?! What are you doing here?!”

“Ha-ha-ha! I had a feeling something interesting was bound to

happen around here, so I was hiding out nearby.”

She chuckled as though enjoying this with all her soul.

“Anyway, I heard everything you said. You two are going to duel, right? I shall serve as your witness! Follow me!”

Before I was even given time to process what was going on, she dragged us to a large underground practice facility.

“Okay, it’s already late, so let’s get this thing rolling!”

She clapped her hands together joyfully.

“Lia, Allen—are you two ready?”

“Of course! Any time!” shouted Lia.

“Uh, I guess...,” I answered hesitantly.

Lia and I both nodded. She was raring to go, while I clearly didn’t want to be here.

“Great. The duel between Lia Vesteria and Allen Rodol will start on my mark— Begin!”

She declared the start of the bout in a clear, loud voice.

Drawing my blade, I assumed the middle stance.

Lia stuck her hand out into the air.

“Conquer—Dragon King Fafnir!”

Just then, a large rift opened in the space in front of her, from which she pulled out a sword of deep crimson.

“Hmm-hmm, good boy.”

Beautiful black and white flames danced around the blade when she grabbed the sword.

“I-is that...?”

She had just pulled a sword out of thin air. It was releasing an abnormal, violent power.

This was no trick or illusion—I knew what this power was.

“Is that...Soul Attire?!”

Soul Attire was a power that embodied one’s spirit. Naturally gifted people could attain it after years of harsh training.

It was something I wasn’t able to realize even after over one billion years of training.



I stared at her Soul Attire enviously.

“Hey, what are you spacing out for? Go ahead and bring out your Soul Attire, too,” she demanded, making it sound as if this was an ability everyone should have.

“Uh, ha-ha... Sorry, but that ability is far too advanced for me,” I admitted, shrugging and shaking my head.

Lia’s eyes went wide.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

Unfortunately, I was unable to develop Soul Attire. Not only that, but this was also actually the first time I had ever seen it.

“Pfft... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Hoooo boy, my stomach... It hurts...”

She had grabbed her stomach and burst out laughing.

“Ha-ha...ha... The very notion that a novice who can’t even produce Soul Attire is challenging the woman feared by all as the Black and White Princess... It’s just absurd!”

One moment, she was laughing, and the next, she was glaring daggers at me.

This princess sure is expressive...

I was certain there was never a dull moment with her.

Also, I’m not the one who asked for this duel.

She was just trying to provoke me.

But raising objections now would only cause more trouble...

I decided it would be best to hold my tongue.

“Well, I’ll give you one thing—you’ve got guts. Hmm-hmm, but don’t think this is going to be quick. I’m gonna fry you over a low flame... I want to hear you simmer!”

Her...*special personality* was in stark contrast to her elegant appearance. The gentle persona I saw at the entrance ceremony must have been a total act.

I know I can’t summon Soul Attire.

Still, that didn’t guarantee my loss. I just had to do the best I could without it.

“Are you sure you’re ready, Lia?” I asked, not budging from my middle stance.

“Yes, bring it on.”

Lia looked as cool as could be. Lifting a hand from her sword, she beckoned at me provokingly with her index finger.

...I may not be very skilled, but I’m still a swordsman.

I couldn’t take her snooty attitude lying down.

“First Style—Flying Shadow!”

I fired the attack I used to restrain opponents with greater speed and force than usual.

“Wh-what? A projectile slash attack?!”

Surprise showed on her face for a moment, but she quickly and calmly assumed a defensive position.

“White Dragon Scales!”

White flames coiled around her to form a giant shield, which burned up my Flying Shadow.

“Wow, this might actually be kinda fun... Huh?!”

Using her shield to hide myself from her view, I quickly closed the gap between us. Then I stepped within her shield and unleashed a

flurry of attacks.

“Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!”

“Eight at once...?!”

Lia froze for a moment in the face of my approaching eight slash attacks, but then acted quickly.

“Tch—Black Dragon Breath!”

She sent extremely powerful black flames my way, burning up all eight of my slashes.

She’s as strong as advertised.

Fafnir, her Soul Attire, was far more versatile than I’d initially suspected.

But that exchange gave me a good grasp of her fighting style!

Her Soul Attire let her manipulate black and white flames at will. She had used white flames to form a large shield around herself, then used black flames to release a violent attack directly at me.

I need to be wary of the black flames...

They were strong enough to stop Eight-Span Crow in its tracks. I’d be finished if I took a direct hit.

Next time, I’ll mix in a feint to try to throw her off balance!

With a plan in mind, I charged toward her to get within attacking range.

“St-stay back! Draconic Rage!”

Lia scattered a blaze of black and white around herself.

“...Shoot.”

Faced with far-reaching fire bouncing all around her, I decided to play it safe and jump back.

We now stood a great distance from each other, entering a momentary stalemate.

“What was that move you just used...?” she asked.

“I don’t know if you mean Flying Shadow or Eight-Span Crow, but I created them both myself,” I answered.

“...Interesting. I see now that Reia didn’t pick you for nothing,” Lia muttered, flashing a glance at the chairwoman. “You clearly take your swordcraft seriously and have spent a significant amount of time on your training.”

A ridiculous one-billion-plus years, to be more specific.

“Fine, I’ll admit you’re a *decent* swordsman!” she proclaimed.

“...Thanks,” I answered. I decided to take it as praise. Best to see things with a glass half full.

“But that technique won’t mean anything if you can’t produce Soul Attire, no matter how skilled you are. I’m going to teach you that lesson today. Hard work will only get so far—you’re hopeless without talent!” Lia announced, then charged directly at me.

A frontal assault... Bring it on!

I bent down and waited for her to reach me. When she got within range, she unleashed an attack.

“Hegemonic Style—Hard Strike!”

Lia slashed her sword diagonally with incredible force.

“Hah!”

In response, I performed the exact same diagonal slash. Our swords collided, sending sparks flying. The impact sent a massive shock through my arms.

“What the...?!”

There was far more strength behind that attack than I ever would’ve expected from a girl.

“Haaaaaah!”

“Graaahhhh...!”

I pushed back at her attack with all the strength in my legs, back, abdomen, arms, and the entire rest of my body. But it wasn’t good enough.

Crap...I can’t stop her?!

Her explosive strength completely overpowered me, sending my blade flying out of my hands and exposing my abdomen to attack.

“There!” she screamed, delivering a brutal kick to my stomach.

“Whoa!”

I jumped back to lessen the impact, just barely avoiding a major blow, then immediately picked my sword back up and prepared my next attack.

Dammit, she’s stupid strong...

The secret behind her outrageous might was the flames burning behind her. They exploded when our blades collided, endowing her strikes with considerable propulsive force.

Having landed a clear blow to my body, Lia looked at me with pity.

“I hate to admit this, but...in a match of pure swordplay, you would come out on top. As long as I’m fortified with Soul Attire, though, your fundamentals aren’t enough to win. Get what I’m saying? Soul Attire is unbeatable!”

Swordplay and Soul Attire truly were a match made in heaven.

But she’s overconfident.

I saw it clearly in our last exchange. She was relying too heavily on the overwhelming might of her Soul Attire, and her fundamental swordcraft was crude. Between her negligence and self-conceit, I thought I had a good chance of winning.

Maybe it’s time to try that move.

I’d made over ten trips to the World of Time. During my first time there, I devised a move more for amusement than anything else. I never thought I would actually use it in battle.

If that’s what I’m doing...I need to accurately predict Lia’s next move.

I played back all our exchanges in my mind.

During our first exchange, she responded to my long-distance Flying Shadow by summoning a large shield of white fire.

During our second exchange, she countered my approaching Eight-Span Crow with a ferocious torrent of black flame.

During our third exchange, when I tried to move closer to her, she calmly held me back by scattering a blaze in a wide range around herself.

Lia has consistently made rational and conservative decisions.

And now she had found an attack in her Hegemonic Style that was proven to be effective against me, Hard Strike. She would almost undoubtedly deploy it again.

After finishing my analysis, I deduced the most suitable location for our encounter considering our positions. Being careful not to arouse suspicion, I casually passed the tip of my sword through that point.

All right, the trap is set.

Now if Lia just acted as I thought she would, I would hit her with an explosive attack.

“Hmm-hmm, you’re finished this time!”

She smiled sadistically, already sure of her victory. She clearly hadn’t noticed what I was planning.

“Prepare yourself!” she shouted.

Lia rushed toward me, closing in on me in an instant. Without slowing her momentum at all, she swung her crimson sword down.

“Hegemonic Style—Hard Strike!”

Our eyes met, both of us certain that we would win.

...Exactly as I predicted.

Sheathing my sword, I calmly turned around.

“Second Style—Hazy Moon!”

Out from nowhere, a violent slash materialized and struck her in the chest.

“How...?!”

The blow caught Lia completely off guard, knocking her unconscious.

Second Style, Hazy Moon was a preset slash maneuver. Pulling it off required anticipating the spot my opponent would pass through and preparing a strike through that space beforehand. The moment my adversary moved into the designated area, a devastating counter would automatically activate. Though it was an extremely difficult attack to land, it was deadly when it did.

“Hmm, I had a feeling this would happen...”

Chairwoman Reia confirmed that Lia was unconscious and declared the result of the duel.

“Lia Vesteria is defeated! Victory goes to Allen Rodol!”

I let out a huge sigh, finally free from the tension of the battle.

Man, she was something else...

But fighting someone who could produce Soul Attire was a valuable experience.

"You really are strong, Allen. I knew I was right to take an interest in you!"

"Th-thanks..."

I didn't know when or where she'd taken an interest in me, but being praised for my strength wasn't a bad feeling at all.

"But forget that; we need to get Lia to the infirmary!" I exclaimed.

I moved toward her unconscious body, but the chairwoman shook her head.

"No need. Lia is tough. I'm sure she'll regain consciousness in two or three minutes."

"R-really...?"

But still...no matter how hardy she was, it seemed unwise to just let her lay there unconscious.

"Well, you'll see shortly. Just leave her be and watch."

"Y-yes, ma'am."

It had seemed like Chairwoman Reia and Lia knew each other, so I decided to trust her and wait for at least a few minutes.

"...Huh?!"

Two minutes later, Lia sat up just as the chairwoman said she would.

"H-huh? Where...am I...?"

"Sorry, Lia. You lost the duel."

"Duel? ...?!"



Seeming to have remembered what was going on, she leaped to her feet and raced toward me.

“Wh-what do you mean?! How did I lose?! What did you do?!”

“Uh, well...”

I answered her rapid-fire questions by carefully explaining Hazy Moon.

“It’s not fair! That has to be cheating!” she complained, displeased with my explanation.

“Well, that’s what I did...”

While it was certainly out of the ordinary, it was a legitimate move. First off, the slash attack I’d prepared in the space that I’d predicted she would pass through wasn’t completely invisible. If you really focused, you could see a slight shift in the air. Lia surely would have noticed it if she hadn’t already been certain of her victory.

To be frank, I’d say this was more her loss than my win.

I didn’t think telling Lia that directly would be a good idea, though.

For some reason, Chairwoman Reia smirked.

“Ah-heh—anyway, this duel ended in Allen’s victory. What are you going to do, Lia?” she asked with a wicked smirk.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Lia responded.

She tilted her head in confusion, as if she’d genuinely forgotten.

“You know... The special agreement you made before the duel.”

“Agreement...?!”

Her face suddenly stiffened.

She’d actually forgotten...

It seemed she could be a bit of an airhead.

“That reaction tells me you remembered. ‘The loser becomes the winner’s slave’... That was the agreement you made before the duel!”

The chairwoman looked like she was having the time of her life as she backed Lia into a corner.

“U-um, well, ‘slave’ was more a figure of speech...,” Lia muttered, waving her arms hastily. Her eyes were darting back and forth in a clear panic. Considering she was on the brink of becoming a slave, her reaction was understandable.

“I see... Well, this duel didn’t go through registration, and we didn’t carry out formal procedures. I wouldn’t feel good about it, but if you insist, Lia, I’m willing to turn a blind eye to this...”

Surprisingly, she was giving Lia a way out.

“R-Reia...!”

She was gaping at Chairwoman Reia as if she were a god.

...This would actually save me a lot of trouble.

Honestly, the idea of Lia becoming my slave troubled me. She was a princess of the Vesteria Kingdom. If this arrangement came to light, it would cause an international scandal.

That's a wrap on this situation.

A wave of relief washed over me. But it was short-lived.

"However...could you really live with that?" Reia asked Lia gravely.

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"I was just thinking... What would it look like if a princess of the proud Vesteria Kingdom lost a fight that she picked herself, then wriggled out of the terms she set? It's fine if you don't have a problem with that. I just found it curious. But you can forget about it," Reia said in an affected manner. She was clearly provoking Lia intentionally.

What is wrong with her...? We were almost free of this...

I glared daggers at the chairwoman.

This settles it. She has a malicious personality.

It was clear in the entrance ceremony and here as well. She was totally toying with Lia.

The greater the distance I keep from her, the better.

While I was lost in thought, Lia began to growl in frustration.

"Gurrrrrrrgh! Dammit! Fine! I'll stick to the agreement! That's what you want, right?!" she screamed, sounding half out of her mind.

Chairwoman Reia gave an exaggerated shrug.

"Hey, don't act like I forced you into this... This is your problem. Hold the agreement and become his slave or trample it underfoot and run. *Only you* can make this decision."

"Grrrrrrr..."

Lia grumbled wordlessly, then turned to glare at me.

"I—I am unworthy, but I pledge myself to your service... Master..."

She bowed to me. Her face was beet red, she was biting her lip, and she was shaking from humiliation.

"Uh, um...thanks..."

Feeling beyond exhausted, I elected to go along with it just to bring an end to this.



I was alone with Lia in her apartment.

"..."

"..."

We were sitting on a wine-red carpet in total silence. Feeling incredibly uncomfortable, I watched the seconds tick by on my watch.

...Why did this have to happen?

We'd both put our freedom on the line in a duel that had resulted in her becoming my slave. But I wanted no part of it.

The princess of a nation left to study abroad and ended up becoming a slave to some nobody. If people in her home country of Vesteria were to

find out about this, it would create an international incident.

I wanted to be free of this already. Why did I have to get wrapped up in this nonsense?

Haaah...

I'd lost track of how many times I'd sighed internally.

After the duel, Chairwoman Reia told me that *"a slave needs to devote everything to their master!"* before running off somewhere. She was like a hurricane in human form.

But considering the rules of the academy and societal standards, the chairwoman didn't do anything wrong...

At first, I thought she was just messing with us for her own pleasure, but in reality, she was simply upholding her duties as the observer.

Duels were serious sword fights where each participant put their pride on the line. Neither side could back down on the agreement set before a match. Anyone cowardly enough to withdraw would be branded a failure of a swordfighter.

That sentiment was the first thing kids learned in elementary swordcraft academies, and it was engraved in the hearts of all the swordsmen in this country. Scratch that, in the entire world.

Even Dodriel had held to our agreement. He'd swallowed his great pride to bow to me, had taken back his insult against me and Mom, and had apologized. That was how important it was to stick to your word after a duel.

That's what makes this such a tricky situation...

Given Lia's personality, she wouldn't simply withdraw from her pledge of becoming my slave even if I told her to. If she was the type of person willing to go back on her word, she would have allowed the chairwoman to cover up her defeat.

That meant she could only free herself from servitude through defeating me in another match.

That's pretty unlikely now, though.

Lia had exposed to me her attack patterns, her defensive and evasive habits, her way of thinking in battle, and other important components of her fighting style during our last duel. If she had an ace up her sleeve, she could give me a run for my money but still wouldn't trounce me. I had one or two tricks she hadn't seen yet, too.

Should I just lose on purpose?

That thought flashed across my mind, but I quickly dismissed it. That wouldn't work. I was an honest duelist—I could never allow myself to do something so foolish.

Argh...what should I do...?

All this ruminating wasn't going to accomplish anything. There was nothing I could do right now, so getting worked up was just a waste of time. After accepting that, I started to look around Lia's dorm

surreptitiously.

Her room is cute.

It was girly and nicely decorated, with white as the dominant color plus pink accents. Considering her royal status, I expected to see luxurious furnishings like a chandelier or something, but there was nothing of the sort. It was just a typical room for a girl her age.

It smells kinda nice, too.

It didn't smell like perfume or detergent. Rather, it was a vaguely sweet and natural—now that I thought about it, that was a girl's smell.

Next, I spotted something in the room that caught my interest.

Huh...so she likes dolls.

She had placed two cute dolls, a bear and a fox, by the pillow on her bed.

Ha-ha, she has a sweet side.

I continued to observe Lia's room.

"Can you stop looking around my room...please? It's embarrassing," she muttered, blushing a little.

"S-sorry...," I apologized. It was wrong to scrutinize another person's room, especially when it belonged to a girl who was the same age as you.

That was big progress, though!

That was the first honest interaction we'd had since we'd entered her apartment. Not wanting to let this opportunity go to waste now that the tension between us had lessened a little, I mustered my courage and tried to speak to her.

"Um..."

"Wh-what is it, Master?"

"Can you, uh...please stop talking to me like that?"

That stilted way of speaking didn't fit her at all. I probably felt that way because I'd seen her true nature earlier.

"As your slave, it would be unseemly for me to speak to you otherwise. And I...also have my pride as a swordswoman. I must hold to the agreement," Lia murmured, turning from me. She was even more stubborn than I thought.

We're going to be living together from now on, though... Having her speak to me like a slave the entire time is going to feel awkward...

I didn't dislike her. In fact, I wanted to grow closer to her. She could definitely be rude, and she put on an act to get other people to like her... However, she'd also kept her word from before the duel and had a swordswoman's dignity. Our relationship was a little too complicated to call good right now, but I wanted us to become friends.

She can also produce Soul Attire.

If possible, I also wanted her to give me some tips on creating it.

If we're going to become good friends, I need to get her to speak to me like one first...

Words had a major influence on conduct and relationships. If she continued to address me as her master, she would always keep me at arm's length, and our friendship would never bloom.

If I could get her to quit speaking to me so stiffly, I was sure the distance between us would shrink surprisingly quickly.

Given how stubborn and headstrong she is...I guess I have only one option.

Though it was forceful, I felt like I had no choice this time.

Staring her directly in the eyes, I adopted a slightly strict tone.

"Fine...this is an *order*, then. You are forbidden from speaking to me like you're a slave."

"Th-that's not fair!"

I expected her to react that way.

"Isn't it within a master's rights to force a slave to do things they don't want to do?" I asked.

It was a far-fetched argument, but it would do for now.

"...Understood, Mas— *Ahem*. Got it. But are you sure about this? You can't take back an order."

"Yeah, I'm sure."

That kind of formality didn't suit her. Talking casually was much more natural.

"Then you should stop speaking politely to me, too... It's creepy," she added, blushing a little.

"Really? I'll make sure to cut it out, then."

I wasn't good at fancy speech, either, so I was willing to take her up on that.

Now that we had reached an agreement, I changed the subject.

"What a thing to get ourselves into on our first day at the academy..."

"Hmph, I wonder whose fault that is?"

"...Isn't that a little unfair? Don't get me wrong; I definitely deserve blame for what I saw, but isn't this partially on you for changing in the men's locker room?"

"Huh? What are you saying? I was in the women's locker room."

"...Huh? No, there's no way! That was definitely the men's locker room!"

"R-really?! I know I checked before I went in, though!"

No, I was positive the sign had said that it was the men's locker room when I'd gone in. After I'd witnessed...what I never should have seen, I'd gone back to confirm it had been the men's locker room. That was distinct in my memory.

As if realizing something, Lia's mouth fell to the floor.

“Could this have been Reia’s doing?” she asked.

“...I could see that,” I responded.

The more I thought about it, the more the chairwoman’s timing seemed off. It was if she’d known what was going to happen.

I didn’t know what her goal was...but this had her fingerprints all over it.

“She set us up! But why? What purpose did she have?!” Lia asked.

“Beats me...but I do know she’s a messed-up human being,” I responded.

“...Ugh.”

We both sighed at the same time.

“...Hey, don’t imitate me,” Lia snapped.

“No, I sighed a split second earlier than you,” I argued.

“No way, I—”

We then enjoyed chatting about nothing in particular. Just as I’d expected, speaking as friends quickly closed the distance between us.

Dong, dong, dong, rang the wall clock in the apartment. I looked at my watch and saw that it was nearly eleven at night. I needed to prepare for the next day and get to bed.

“Ah, I didn’t realize it was this late,” I said.

“We need to start getting ready for bed now if we want to have a good first day of class,” Lia added.

“Yeah. You get in the shower first. I’ll wait for you.”

“...Could you say that in a less suggestive way?”

I thought I was just being courteous, but for some reason, she glared at me.

“Uh... How was that suggestive?”

I didn’t think I’d said anything that could be taken that way...

“Um, never mind, it’s nothing!”

Lia’s face flushed deep red, then she headed for the dressing room.

“If you peep this time, I *will* kill you!” she spat, slamming the curtains closed.



Lia broke off her conversation with Allen and closed the dressing-room curtain.

“You get in the shower first. I’ll wait for you”... Surely, he said that intentionally!

Her face still deep red, she shook her head.

Yeah, that was a trap... There’s no way only my mind would go there! He’s a dirty schemer!

While rationalizing her reaction to his words, she removed her top, then her skirt. Just as she was about to undo her bra, her hands froze.

“This curtain isn’t see-through, is it...?”

Still in her underwear, she strained her eyes at the curtain. The recent incident had raised her level of vigilance.

“...No, it seems fine.”

Now content that there was nothing to worry about, she took off her underwear and entered the bathroom.

Lia washed her long hair thoroughly with shampoo and conditioner as the bathtub filled with hot water. Next, she cleansed her body and massaged her muscles. She then gathered her hair into a towel and submerged herself in the bathtub up to her shoulders.

“Ah, this feels good...”

She stretched her whole body, extending her legs completely and spreading out her toes.

“...What a weird guy.”

As she washed away her exhaustion from the day, she voiced her candid thoughts about Allen.

“I’m his slave now, but he hasn’t even tried to touch me...,” she murmured, lightly splashing the water. “I know I’m good-looking, though.”

Lifting her right hand out of the water, she inspected her slightly flushed arm.

Strict daily training had left Lia’s arms and legs toned. Her chest was well-developed for a fifteen-year-old, and her torso was healthily curvy. She had an undeniably attractive body.

“It’s not like I want him to touch me or anything... It’s just...”

Any sexual advances would have distressed her, but the fact that Allen had demonstrated no interest whatsoever hurt her feelings a little. She continued to speak to herself as she sorted through these mixed feelings.

“A-anyway, I can’t let my guard down! ‘All men are wolves’—that’s what Father always said!”

Lia’s father—Gris Vesteria, the king of Vesteria—loved her dearly. His infatuation with her was well-known throughout the kingdom, and he’d been keeping men from her almost since the moment she was born. Lia’s father was so thorough that not only were all her servants female, but so were all the guards assigned to her.

Only the intervention of Reia, an old friend of Lia’s, and the recommendation of a loyal retainer had convinced her parents to allow her to attend Thousand Blade Academy.

All this is to say that Lia wasn’t used to being around the opposite sex.

“All men are wolves. I can’t let myself forget that... Letting my guard down for even a moment could be fatal!”

Having renewed her slackened vigilance, she got out of the bathtub

and walked to the dressing room. She wiped her wet body off with a towel, but as she was drying her hair, her face went pale.

Sh-shoot... Did I forget to grab a change of clothes...?!

The shock took the words from Lia's mouth; she tended to be a little ditzy.

Asking Allen to bring her a change of clothes was out of the question. She was fine with him seeing her pajamas, but there was no way she could let him see her underwear.

Ugh, there's no other way... I have to go out as is...

She wrapped herself in a bath towel to hide her nakedness, then steeled herself and pulled open the curtain.

"I-I'm out of the bath..."

"Okay, I'll get in— Huh?! L-Lia?!"

Allen's female classmate was standing in front of him wearing only a bath towel. Her fresh and youthful skin was moist, and her cheeks were slightly flushed from embarrassment. The sight of her attractive, half-naked figure sent the young man into a wordless tizzy.

"I—I forgot to bring a change of clothes... D-don't stare..."

"Ah, sorry!"

Just like Lia, Allen was not at all accustomed to the opposite sex. He grew up in Goza Village, which had an elderly and declining population, and his hard student life at Grand Swordcraft Academy had given him no chances to interact with girls.

Hmm... His face went really red. He's more innocent than I thought...

Seeing Allen's flustered state calmed Lia down a little bit. She appeared to have forgotten that her own face was flushed from embarrassment as well.

She walked past Allen and stepped into a different room.

"This is my room, so you'd better not enter without permission, okay?"

Lia had received a larger apartment than regular students because of her royal status. It consisted of her room, a kitchen, a bedroom, and a spare room.

"S-sure, no problem... I'm gonna get in the bath now, all right?"

"Go ahead."

After that short exchange, Lia closed the door to her room, and Allen entered the dressing room.

"Sheesh, that reaction... Hee-hee, that was kinda cute," she whispered to herself as she put one leg through a pair of panties. Donning cute, white pajamas with pink polka dots, she began to dry her hair with a blow-dryer.

"Is he what you call a 'beta male'...?"

She wasn't quite certain what that term meant.

"...Wait, I'm getting careless!"

She realized that she had been opening her heart a little to Allen.

"H-he's a natural-born schemer... He pretended to have an innocent reaction to get me to relax. It's scary how good at this he is..."

Once again reaching the wrong conclusion, Lia's face went pale. She renewed her guard.

"I'm sure his wicked heart will be exposed when it's time for bed."

After finishing with her hair, she headed for the kitchen to drink some cold water from the refrigerator. While she was on the way, Allen opened the dressing-room curtain and emerged, wearing his pajamas.

"Ah."

"Ah."

The unexpected encounter birthed an awkward silence between them.

"That was really fast. Are you a quick-bath kind of guy?" Lia asked.

"Ah-ha-ha, I guess so," answered Allen.

They made small talk, losing track of the time. Before they knew it, the clock hit eleven, which meant it was about time to go to bed.

"Hey, Lia. I think I'm gonna hit the hay...", Allen began while looking at his watch.

"Okay..."

Here it comes...

Lia's heart was bursting out of her chest. She gulped in anticipation of what she was sure was coming next.

She had become his slave. She would have to comply with whatever he asked.

Urgh... I don't want my first time to be forced...

Trembling, she quietly waited for Allen's order.

"You can have the bed. I'll sleep on the floor."

He laid down right there on the ground.

"...Huh?"

Her mouth fell open in surprise.

"A-Allen? Are you really not going to do anything?"

"Uh, do what?"

Allen looked genuinely confused. He'd already taken a bath, brushed his teeth, and changed into his pajamas, so he couldn't think of anything else to do.

"Oh, forget it," Lia muttered.

She sighed at his overly automatic and uninterested behavior, then sat down on the bed, which was large enough for two, and patted the spot to the right of her.

"Come on, we can both sleep here."

"Huh? But...wouldn't it be uncomfortable to sleep with a boy?"

"But it wouldn't make sense for a slave to sleep in a bed while her

master sleeps on the hard floor, right?"

"I guess you have a point..."

"Then stop finding excuses and get in bed."

"G-got it."

Allen laid down to the right of Lia, and they both pulled the large comforter over themselves.

"Can I turn off the lights...?" she asked.

"Y-yeah," he answered.

Lia used a remote to bring the room's illumination down to a faint orange glow. It was just bright enough for them to see each other's faces if they strained their eyes. They were close enough to hear each other's breathing if they listened carefully. An uncomfortable tension filled the bedroom.

"G-good night, Lia."

"Good night...Allen."

Brief words exchanged, they quietly closed their eyes in spite of their throbbing hearts.

I can't believe he's actually not going to do anything.

...It occurred to Lia that he was probably going to mess with her after she fell asleep.

With that possibility in mind, she pretended to fall asleep... But Allen did nothing, of course, so it was all a waste of time.

Lia slowly sat up and stared at the boy lying to the right of her. He was breathing peacefully in his sleep.

"How is he resting so comfortably...? I guess I was the only one thinking about this."

She felt a little defeated. Ever the sore loser, she pinched Allen's cheek gently, almost as if it was out of revenge.

"...His cheeks are surprisingly soft for a boy."

They were as smooth as a baby's bottom, which awoke a great curiosity in Lia.

"He won't wake up if I pull on them a little more, right?"

She scooted herself closer and tugged on his cheeks some more.

"Ah-ha, this is kinda fun..."

In the midst of pulling his cheeks, she realized that he was a surprisingly deep sleeper and saw an opportunity.

"What the hell is Second Style—Hazy Moon?! That was a cowardly move... How do you like this...?!"

She pulled and prodded his cheeks with both hands, lifting her spirits by venting her anger.

"Phew... Well, what's done is done. I'll let you off the hook for now."

A strong wave of drowsiness hit her, and she laid back down on the bed.

She ended up facing Allen. He was sleeping fitfully.

...He doesn't seem like a bad guy.

That was the conclusion she reached.

He has no ulterior motives, he's a very strong swordsman, and he's kinda handsome, too... Wait, what the hell am I thinking?!

She shook her head, realizing she had been beginning to fall for Allen.

"I should just go to sleep. I'm really tired."



It had been a long and stressful day. She closed her eyes.

“Good night...my strange master,” she muttered and fell into a deep sleep.



Lia and I headed to class together the next day. We were both in Class 1-A and living in the same apartment, so it made sense to stick together.

“Oh, and Allen! There’s a local specialty in my country called ramzac. It’s really delicious!”

“Huh, I’d like to try it some time.”

“I know a good restaurant near the academy! I’ll show it to you when we have a chance!”

She was acting significantly kinder toward me, perhaps because she was feeling refreshed from a good night’s sleep.

I don’t know what happened, but...this is a hundred times better than how coldly she treated me last night.

Moreover, I found that she was fun to talk to. She was very expressive, both with her face and her gestures, so when we were together, there was never a dull moment. I was sure she had always been the popular type.

We arrived at the Class 1-A classroom and opened the rickety sliding door.

“G-good morning, Lia!”

“Nice day, isn’t it?”

Two female students greeted her nervously as soon as we walked in.

“Good morning. It does feel nice out there,” Lia responded, smiling humbly and waving to them. She had adopted her nice-girl act quickly.

...When she acts this way, she really does look like a graceful princess.

This ladylike and dignified persona stood in stark contrast to her cheerful and slightly crass behavior that she revealed when the two of us were alone. I would have believed her without question if she told me that she actually had a split personality.

Lia began to make casual conversation with the girls, so I quietly moved away from them. Girls had their own friendships. As a boy, I would be an unwanted presence.

Looks like I can sit wherever I want.

There didn’t seem to be any assigned seats. I decided to head for a desk at the very back of the room by a window, where I would stand out the least.

There were three boys talking excitedly on my path there. I thought it would seem unfriendly to pass by them without saying hello, so I

built up courage and addressed them.

"Hi there," I stuttered, waving at them.

"" "...""

Halting their conversation, they turned to glance at me. They then turned back to one another without a word, ignoring me so blatantly that I almost respected it.

Though they only glared at me for a moment, I sensed real malice in their eyes.

Everyone really does hate me...

Their coldness had to be a consequence of what happened the previous day at the entrance ceremony from hell.

First impressions heavily influence how you think about a person...

Starting out as the least popular student in school on the very first day was going to be rough.

Well, at least they're not insulting me to my face.

At Grand Swordcraft Academy I was called the Reject Swordsman, a coward, a cheater, and a variety of other horrible insults. Getting ignored by three people was nothing in comparison.

Knowing they weren't going to return my greeting, I started to slink away from them.

"Hey, you three. Can I have a word?"

Lia addressed the three boys with a soft smile plastered on her face.

"Y-yes, of course!"

"Wh-whatever do you need, Lia?"

"Did we do something to offend you?!"

They were beside themselves with excitement, no doubt because a girl of unparalleled beauty had decided to speak with them.

Those dudes are shameless... But what's Lia doing talking to them anyway?

I tuned in on their conversation while heading for the seat by the window.

"I believe Allen just said hello... Were you too engrossed in your conversation to hear him?"

That caught me by surprise.

"Uh... Well, you see..."

"I didn't really hear him... Er, I guess I did, but..."

"He spoke really quietly, so...I wasn't sure what he said...?"

Flustered, the three of them failed to find an appropriate answer.

Lia gave them a wide smile.

"Personally, I *hate* jerks who do things like that."

"" "...""

The boys were left speechless. Paying them no mind, she continued her address with the same gentle smile on her face.

"Please never speak to me again. Good day."

Having said her fill, she set her bag down on the desk to the right of mine.

The entire classroom froze from shock, the atmosphere so oppressive that no one wanted to speak. Lia, however, looked completely unbothered as she smoothed out her skirt, sat down, took her textbooks out of her bag, and casually set them on the desk.

“S-sorry about that...,” I apologized with a whisper.

She was standing up for me.

Doing that had cut her off from the rest of the class. The three boys were still scowling at her.

I was racked with guilt.

“What are you apologizing for? All I did was tell them how I really felt about them,” Lia responded with a chuckle. It was genuine, not a fake laugh to make me feel better.

For a moment, I was enchanted by her pure, beautiful smile.

Lia had upturned the classroom in a way only she could. The silence persisted until the door suddenly flew open.

An extremely drowsy Rose walked into the room. There was no trace of her usual dignity; she must not have been a morning person. Her long hair was all over the place, the locks at the top of her head standing straight up in the air.

Her eyes darted around the classroom until they met mine. She walked unsteadily toward me, sat down at the desk in front of me, and yawned.

“Good morning, Allen. Lia, too, I guess,” she mumbled.

“Good morning, Rose,” I responded.

“What do you mean, ‘I guess?’” Lia snapped.

Lia glared at her, but Rose didn’t notice at all—she was occupied with another massive yawn.

“Excuse me, Valencia, but your...your hair is kind of all over the place. Do you need help?” I asked, pointing at the distracting frizz on top of her head.

“...It’s fine. Gravity’ll bring it down,” she muttered briefly.

It seemed like she was the type to just wait for bedhead to fix itself. I didn’t know too much about how girls handled their hair, but Rose had to have been in the minority there.

The school bell then chimed *ding-dong, ding-dong* to announce the start of class, and the classroom door flew open immediately.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen!”

Chairwoman Reia walked into the room with a pep in her step.

“Hmm... Now that’s what I want to see! No late arrivals or absences on the first day—couldn’t have asked for a better start!” she exclaimed with a hearty laugh.

One girl spoke up and asked the question on everyone’s mind.

“U-um...what are you doing here, Chairwoman?”

“Isn’t that obvious? I’m the homeroom teacher for Class 1-A.”

A buzz ran through the classroom. I began to panic.

...This is the absolute worst thing that could’ve happened. And what about her job as the chairwoman anyway?

The chairs of the Elite Five Academies held massive societal influence and great political power. With that might came enormous responsibility; according to rumor, that meant dealing with a massive workload every day of the week.

It’s not a job that should give you enough free time to work as a homeroom teacher.

Chairwoman Reia clapped her hands together loudly, jolting me out of my musings.

“Okay, let’s get morning homeroom started. I’m going to kick things off with a very special announcement!”

She paused for dramatic effect, then went on eagerly.

“That announcement is...our participants for the Elite Five Holy Festival, which is being held this weekend!”

The class stirred at the mention of the festival.

The Elite Five Holy Festival was an event where each of the Elite Five Academies chose three skilled new students to represent them in a round-robin-style tournament for the championship. Performing well in this contest could guarantee a path to the coveted career of a high-ranking holy knight, so it was no surprise it sent the class into a buzz.

“Normally, we make the selections with significant care, taking into account the results of the practical exam held this week. This year, however, we have already chosen the participants!”

An uncomfortable tension filled the room. I had a bad feeling about this.

I had every right to feel anxious—the chairwoman had a wicked smile on her face. She must have been up to something.

“There’s no point keeping you in suspense, so I’ll go ahead and announce them!”

Everyone fell dead silent. A few seconds later, she revealed the participants.

“The representatives who will fight for Thousand Blade Academy this year are—Lia Vesteria, Rose Valencia, and last but not least, Allen Rodol!”

...Yep, that was what I expected.

I cast a sharp glare at Chairwoman Reia and let out an enormous sigh.



It didn't take long for someone to object to the announcement.

"Pl-please wait, Chairwoman!"

A male student spoke up.

"Is something the matter?" the chairwoman asked.

"It's just that...I can't object to Lia and Rose being selected. Everyone knows Lia can produce Soul Attire, and Rose is the inheritor of the Cherry Blossom Blade Style. I hate to admit it, but they're both more skilled than me."

"Hmm. And?"

"Allen Rodol, on the other hand... I know very little about him. I don't understand why he was chosen for the honor of participating in the Holy Festival!" he proclaimed, his eyes trained sternly on me.

Glaring at me isn't going to accomplish anything...

The teachers had selected the participants, so getting angry with me was barking up the entirely wrong tree.

Not sure what to do, I scratched my cheek uncomfortably. Then two more male students stood up.

"I don't get it, either! Why was this total nobody chosen over us?!"

"Please give us a justifiable reason!"

I realized that these three were the boys who ignored my greeting earlier.

"A reason? What reason would there be other than strength?" the chairwoman answered nonchalantly. There was no way those three boys were going to be satisfied by such a simple explanation.

"Are you saying this self-taught swordsman who couldn't get accepted into a single school of swordcraft is stronger than us?!"

"Chairwoman...are you in your right mind?"

"Do you know anything about Grand Swordcraft Academy, the school he came from? It's a tiny boarding school in the boonies that has never produced an Elite Five Academy student. Apparently, a somewhat competent swordsman named Dodriel used to go there, but his present whereabouts are unknown. It's a totally obscure school for dimwits."

In the midst of their pleading, a single piece of information caught my attention.

...Dodriel is missing.

Now that I thought about it, I hadn't seen him since that duel.

Not that I care.

After listening to the trio plead their case, the chairwoman responded:

"So what do you three intend to do about this?"

She was surprisingly receptive to their protests.

"W-well...we would like you to reselect the participants!"

"It's established practice to choose the competitors for the Elite Five

Holy Festival based on the results of a practical exam!”

“This goes against all precedent! We request that you reconsider!”

After the chairwoman ceded some ground, my insistent classmates grew emboldened. However, what she said next shattered their momentum.

“Hmm... Are you saying you object to my decision as the chairwoman?”

“““...”””

Silence blanketed the entire classroom. You could cut the tension with a knife.

No matter how screwed up Reia was as a person—and she was *really* screwed up—she was the chairwoman of one of the Elite Five Academies. Saying the wrong thing to her could get you immediately expelled.

Now that the boys had gone this far, however, there was no backing down.

“...Y-yes, that’s right. We cannot sanction your selection of Allen Rodol!”

They had now openly opposed her. The other two boys followed the first.

“This swordsman from an obscure, third-rate academy—self-taught, no less—cannot represent us!”

“All three of us graduated from prestigious swordcraft academies! We were near the top of our classes as well! There’s no way this total upstart is more proficient than us!”

Now I was taking a real beating.

Just what’s going on here?

Nearly everyone in the class was talking shit about me now. This was depressing.

Dammit, I’m gonna cry...

I watched as they engaged in what might as well have been a competition to see who could come up with the best insult for me.

“Yeesh... Hey, Allen,” Chairwoman Reia called my name with a sigh.

I was sure she had nothing of value to say, but I couldn’t just ignore her.

“...What is it?” I responded curtly.

“You’re really unpopular!”

She began to cackle.

Whose fault do you think that is?!

This was the first time I ever felt like I wanted to hit a girl.

Calm down... Losing my temper here would be playing right into her hands.

Letting out a big breath, I answered as calmly as I could.

“Yes. Unfortunately, that appears to be the case.”

“Tch, what a boring response... You’re not nearly as fun as Lia.”

Reia shrugged in disappointment.

“Ah-ha-ha, sorry I’m not up to snuff,” I apologized while gloating internally. I’d won!

“Hmm... I’m not sure what to do. I didn’t expect this level of resistance.”

The chairwoman put her hand to her chin and began to think. After she fell silent, the same heavy atmosphere descended on the classroom. As both the cause and focal point of this conflict, this situation was significantly more uncomfortable for me than anyone else.

I’ve had enough of this...

Mentally exhausted, I walked up to Reia and whispered in her ear.

“Chairwoman Reia, I’m fine with being removed from the participants. I don’t care that much about the Holy Festival...”

I honestly didn’t have great interest in this tournament. It was an event designed for the participants to flaunt what they’d learned in middle school. That was made abundantly clear by its position on the schedule—the first weekend of our high school tenure.

I hadn’t been let into a single school of swordcraft and hadn’t learned anything at all at Grand Swordcraft Academy, so it would be pointless for me to enter. Personally, I was much more interested in the classes here than the Holy Festival. I especially couldn’t wait for the Soul Attire class.

Plus, getting injured in this tournament would interfere with my classes.

There would be many more events of this type in the future. I wanted to train hard at Thousand Blade Academy and make progress before showing off at a competition.

“Okay...I understand. Thank you for telling me how you feel,” she responded, nodding as if convinced. I returned to my seat.

...I might have made things kind of hard on her.

She slotted me, a total nobody in the class’s eyes, into the festival, knowing that decision would be met with great resistance. I couldn’t tell if she did it because of her opinion of my current skill, because she expected growth from me in the future, or because of some kind of special attachment. Regardless, it was clear that she thought more highly of me than anyone else.

The chairwoman took what I had to say seriously and was even willing to hear out the students who were against me being chosen for the event. She’s a little eccentric, but she might actually be a good teacher.

Reia cleared her throat.

“Listen up, everyone. I would like to communicate Allen’s intentions to you.”

She paused a moment and continued speaking.

“This is what he said: ‘Being compared with such incompetent trash offends me. Tell those three sorry excuses for swordsmen that I’ll take them on right here, right now, all by myself. I’ll put them in their place.’”

“...Huh?”

My mind went totally blank.

“That’s the Allen I know and love... So full of confidence! I didn’t set my sights on him for nothing!”

The chairwoman nodded to herself as if in admiration.

“N-no, wait! That’s not what I—,” I started before getting cut off.

“Allen, you cocky little bastard!”

“Who are you calling ‘sorry excuses for swordsmen’?!”

“One-on-three, you say? If you want a beating that badly, we’ll be happy to oblige!”

The trio of boys surrounded me.

“Pl-please calm down. The chairwoman just made that—”

Despite trying to correct the misunderstanding, the applause from the rest of the class drowned me out.

“All right, let’s take this to the practice facility!” the chairwoman proclaimed, not giving me a chance to object.

I can’t believe her...

I shot her a sharp glance, and she responded by giving me a thumbs-up and her most wicked smile to date.

What the hell was that? Is it okay for me to hit her now?



The entirety of Class 1-A walked to the underground practice facility. It was all to watch my mock battle with the three boys, of course.

I can’t believe I’ve been brought here two days in a row... I sighed internally.

One of the three boys addressed me.

“Hey, Allen. You’re just some self-taught small fry from a third-rate academy no one has ever heard of. I can take you alone.”

He drew his sword and jerked his chin up at me.

He was telling me to do the same.

Oh, fine...

The faster I got this over with, the better.

If I take him out now, I’ll be able to avoid the massive disadvantage of fighting one-on-three.

After deciding to play along, I drew my weapon and took the middle stance.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Go ahead,” I responded with a nod.

“GRAAAAAHHHHH!”

As soon as I nodded, he charged at me with a loud scream.

His grip, posture, and speed are all at a high level.

He was every bit as good as you’d expect a student of Thousand Blade Academy to be...except for his poor footwork.

“Slice Iron Style—Rust Remover!”

He swung his sword down at me. I dodged it by turning the left side of my body, then used my scabbard to lift up his sluggish right foot.

“Huh?!”

After I took one of his legs out from under him, he lost his balance and fell onto his back.

I quickly leveled the tip of my sword to his open throat.

“I win.”

“...”

The duel went to me. Surely, winning a one-on-one bout would earn me a little respect? I really didn’t want to take on three of my classmates at the same time. I wanted no part of this pointless exercise in the first place.

I heard fierce booing.

“Come on, Allen, don’t try to weasel your way out of this! The agreement was that you would fight them one against three! That didn’t count! I’m invalidating it with my authority as the chairwoman!”

Reia alone was protesting my victory.

Good grief, just whose side is she on?!

I took a deep breath to prevent my exasperation from showing on my face.

Losing my temper here would be giving her exactly what she wanted. She was the type to feed off provoking emotional reactions in others. I needed to hold my temper, stay calm, and let her nonsense wash over me with a smile.

Beneath the surface, the chairwoman and I were engaging in a duel of our own.

“Are you okay?!”

“How’d you fall over that easily?!”

The other two boys rushed to the one I defeated, who was still dumbfounded by our fight.

“He’s not all talk... We need to take him seriously...”



Still appearing to have some fighting spirit left in him, he quickly got up and readied his sword. The other two unsheathed their brands at the same time and gathered into a triangle formation around me.

One was in front of me, and the other two were behind me diagonally to the left and right. They displayed no intention of making the first move; the last duel must have left them wary.

They're waiting for me to attack one of them so the other two can get me from behind.

As I tried to predict their strategy, I lamented my current situation. *How did things end up this way?*

I wished only to make friends at this academy and have fun honing my swordcraft. The plan was to train with my friends, graduate in three years, then become a holy knight and earn a steady salary.

I wanted to use that money to give Mom an easy life as repayment for all she'd done for me. I didn't know what I was going to do after that, but I might have gotten married and had a family.

That was the peaceful, happy life that should have been mine... Where did I go wrong...?

My classmates glared at me with animosity. If I had to assign my popularity a number value, it would be zero— Actually, it was worse than zero. And now I found myself stuck in a desperate situation, surrounded by three students at once.

"Haaah..." I sighed.

Life is always unpredictable. I'd managed to get into Thousand Blade Academy, one of the Elite Five Academies, yet I was still facing one trial after another, without a moment to catch my breath.

...Let's get this over with.

I figured I might as well start by breaking the deadlock. That would require taking out one point of this triangle.

I picked the boy who happened to be in front of me as my target and closed the distance between us in one step.

"Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!"

"Wha?! Cloudy Sky Style—Cirrocumulus Cloud!"

The boy didn't get into Thousand Blade Academy for nothing. He reacted quickly to my high-speed approach and Eight-Span Crow and was able to respond with a move of his own. However, it wasn't good enough.

"Nrgh... Gah?!"

Cloud Sky Style, Cirrocumulus Cloud was an impressive four-chain attack, but it was still four blows short. I connected with slashes to his head, torso, right shoulder, and collarbone and sent him tumbling backward.

Two more...

I turned around just in time to see the boy I'd clashed with just

moments before lifting his sword overhead.

“Take thiiiiiiiis! Slice Iron Style—Demolish Iron!”

“Too slow.”

I struck his throat as we passed each other.

“Damn...”

His upper body swayed, and he fell flat on his face. When charging into an opponent’s space, you needed to be ready to strike at any moment—lifting your sword before swinging it back down took too much time. I’d now taken two of them out without injury.

“Sorry, guys...I’ll take it from here!”

The voice of the last boy rang behind me.

He’s too close behind me to dodge.

His position on me was so advantageous that there was nothing I could do to avoid him.

“New Moon Style Secret Technique—Moonlight Strike!”

“Look out, Allen!”

“Dodge it!”

I heard Lia and Rose call out as the boy’s sword sped by my ear.

I wasn’t worried—he was standing in range of my trap.

“Second Style—Hazy Moon.”

“Huh? Gah!”

A powerful slice struck him in the stomach, and he collapsed with his eyes wide in astonishment.

“Phew... It’s finally over.”

My prediction of how the battle would end had been entirely accurate. I knew I would be attacked from the spot behind my back, so I’d prepared a counterattack beforehand.

Suddenly, I realized that I’d been doing nothing but fighting recently.

I want to take it easy and swing my sword in peace.

That was what I thought as I sheathed my blade.



After repelling the three boys, I turned to my classmates, who had been watching the bout in attentive silence.

“Th-that was amazing, Allen!”

“How did you do that last slash attack? I couldn’t even see it! Please teach me!”

“Hold on, I’m way more interested in the eight-chain attack he used at the beginning of the fight!”

“He took on all three of them and won without a scratch... Incredible. Congratulations!”

They showered me with praise and applause.

“Huh? U-um...thanks...”

I bowed awkwardly. I'd never been treated this way before.

“Good job, Allen!”

“What kind of trick was that last attack...?!”

Lia and Rose walked up to me together.

“Thanks, Lia. ‘Last attack’... Do you mean Hazy Moon, Valencia?”

Rose nodded enthusiastically.

“Oh yeah, Lia is the only one who's seen it.”

I explained Hazy Moon in simple terms. Rose silently listened with great interest.

“...And that's how it works. Hazy Moon is a preset slash attack.”

“Huh... That's really interesting. Thanks for explaining,” she replied with a wide grin.

“Hmm, I still think that move is unfair, myself,” Lia complained under her breath. She'd been listening quietly next to me with her arms crossed, likely reflecting on the duel from the previous day.

“Really?”

Personally, I thought you could see the spot where I prepared the move if you strained your eyes a little, and it was difficult to set it in the first place without my opponent noticing. It seemed to have plenty of drawbacks to me...

Well, I couldn't expect everyone to share the same opinion. There was nothing more to say about that.

We continued our pleasant conversation until we heard something.

“Urgh...”

“Ouch...”

“I heard that...”

The three boys I'd just trounced sat up slowly.

They must be in really good shape if they can move already.

They were Thousand Blade Academy students, after all. They hadn't only honed their swordcraft, but their bodies as well.

“Um... Are you all okay?” I asked.

I thought it would be rude to merely watch, so I reached out a hand to one of them. He gave me a long, sharp look.

“...”

The boy grabbed my hand and got up unsteadily.

The other two struggled to their feet on their own, and then all three of them stood to face me.

Oh, come on, I really don't want any more fighting.

I eyed them uneasily as I waited to see what they would do next.

“I'm sorry. I hope you can forgive me for my rude remarks,” he said, bowing deeply.

“...Huh?”

I was caught off guard. The other two followed suit and bowed as

well.

“Sorry... It seems we were blind to your skill. You are more than fit to represent us, Allen.”

“I have no right to ask this, but I hope you can forgive the hurtful things I said...”

Maybe they weren’t such bad guys after all.

“Don’t worry about it. I already think nothing of it.”

There was nothing untoward about their objection to my being selected as a participant for the Elite Five Holy Festival—it was actually very reasonable. I could tell from our match that they rigorously refined their swordcraft every day.

I’ve heard that classes are so strict at prestigious swordcraft academies that they’re like a living hell...

Those three overcame that hardship with incredible effort, which paid off with their admittance into Thousand Blade Academy. Despite that, the academy had not selected them as participants for the Elite Five Holy Festival, where they would have been able to show off what they learned in middle school. Instead, a self-taught swordsman from a third-rate, no-name swordcraft academy had been chosen in their place.

Can’t blame them for being upset over that.

It would have been weird if they hadn’t been mad.

I definitely have them beat in terms of time spent training, though.

They’d devoted their lives to their swordcraft during their three years of middle school. However, I’d done the same for over a billion years. I’d swung my blade countless times more than them.

The three boys each let out a long sigh.

“You bested us not only with your swordcraft, but with your character as well... I’ve never felt more embarrassed as a man...”

“You can say that again...”

“Allen...would you be willing to put this all behind us?”

They all extended a hand to me.

“I’d be glad to. Let’s have a great three years together.”

I exchanged a friendly handshake with each of them. Once we finished making up, Chairwoman Reia cleared her throat.

“All right, are we all okay with Allen’s participation in the Holy Festival?”

She looked around the classroom, and everyone nodded.

Still, there was one more thing that was bothering me.

“But what about the students in other classes? They might not be okay with it.”

It didn’t feel right for Class 1-A alone to make the call for who got to represent the entire academy.

The three boys I’d dueled answered my question.

“All in Class 1-A are in favor. The other classes will fall in line.”

“Classes in Thousand Blade Academy are arranged based on grades.”

“Class 1-A is the top one. If we all approve of you, no one will complain. You should be proud!”

That made sense. Seeing that I was satisfied, the chairwoman clapped her hands.

“Okay, I’ll make the announcement one last time! The participants for this year’s Elite Five Holy Festival will be Lia Vesteria, Rose Valencia, and Allen Rodol!”

Deafening applause followed.

CHAPTER 4

Thousand Blade Academy & the Holy Festival

The next morning, Class 1-A gathered in the gymnasium for a practical exam.

“Man, I knew I was going to be cold in this uniform.”

The male gym uniform consisted of a white T-shirt and black shorts. It was light clothing for a brisk spring morning. The male students waited for the female students to finish changing, and the door to the women’s locker room finally opened.

“S-so cold...”

“My legs are freezing...”

“Why’d we have to do this so early in the morning?!”

By contrast, the girls were wearing white T-shirts and bottoms that looked more like underwear than gym shorts. Their legs were fully exposed, giving them much less protection from the cold than us.

The Elite Five Academies valued tradition and formality, and it was apparently an established rule that girls had to wear this black underwear as part of their gym uniform. Though female students weren’t fond of the garment, the academy was showing no signs of budging.

As I was staring into space at the edge of the gym, a girl ran up to me. It was Lia.

“Good morning, Allen.”

“Oh, good morning, Lia.”

Why did she come all the way here to the edge of the gym?

I waited for her to break the silence.

“So...how do I look?” Lia asked, blushing a little and looking down at her outfit.

I don’t know what to say to that...

I inspected her closely from top to bottom.

...It's just a normal gym uniform. Not much to say about it.

There was nothing out of the ordinary—just the regular ensemble sold at the Thousand Blade Academy store. If I had to find something distinct to say about it, it would be the size of her chest through the uniform. It was hard to avoid looking at.

I know what to say in these situations, though, thanks to Ms. Paula.

She'd given me some advice about one year ago.

"Remember this, Allen. When a girl asks you for your opinion about her clothes, accessories, hair clip, or what have you—always tell her it looks great."

Ms. Paula emphasized that it was a bad idea to share my honest opinion. *"It's a man's job to give girls affirmation, no matter what."* That applied to the situation I was in now.

So just as she taught me, I grinned and answered:

"It looks great."

"R-really? Ha-ha...thanks," Lia said quietly before cheerfully returning to the rest of the girls.

...I don't have the faintest inkling of what she wanted there.

Lia's delighted reaction was proof enough that I gave her the right answer, though. I could always count on Ms. Paula.

Is Chairwoman Reia not here yet?

I rubbed my hands together and blew air into them as a small measure against the cold, and then Rose hurried up to me.

"Hey, Allen."

"What is it?"

"How does mine look?" she inquired, grabbing the ends of her white shirt. She had the same question as Lia.

"It looks really great on you."

I gave her the same response I gave Lia.

"O-okay...!"

Blushing a little, she returned to the girls, looking satisfied.

Is this some kind of ritual I'm unfamiliar with? I wondered, confused.

I heard the piercing sound of a whistle. Turning in the direction of the noise, I saw the chairwoman standing in the middle of the gym in her usual black suit.

"Gather up, Class 1-A!"

The chairwoman's voice was much louder than the whistle.

She doesn't need that at all..., I thought, jogging over to her.

When all of Class 1-A assembled around her, she began to speak.

"Now, I'm sure you're all thinking prickly thoughts like *She doesn't need that whistle*, but I won't hear it! This is essential for setting the mood! What's physical education without a whistle, am I right?!"

Well, I did see where Reia was coming from. At Grand Swordcraft

Academy, someone was always blowing a whistle while we practiced our swings or ran during basic physical education.

She's clearly a morning person... Where does she get this energy?

"Let's get this practical exam started!"

She clapped her hands.

"Just so you know, the use of Soul Attire is forbidden. The purpose of this assessment is to measure your ability with the sword. Your speed will be tested in three categories—the draw strike, the ten-foe challenge, and the multistrike. We'll begin with the draw strike! Please start setting up," the chairwoman requested.

"“Yes, ma'am!”" responded two young teachers energetically before promptly doing as they were told. Placing a pedestal on the floor, they set a stalk of bamboo of appropriate length within it and then repeated the process many more times.

Chairwoman Reia explained the first exercise as they set up for the exam.

"I'll give you the gist of the draw-strike section in case you need it. You start by standing in front of one of those stalks of bamboo with your sword still in your scabbard. When you're ready, remove your weapon and slice the bamboo in two. We'll be measuring how long it takes you to cut the bamboo from the moment you flash your blade."

This was the same explanation I'd received when I'd undertaken this test at Grand Swordcraft Academy.

"This gentleman here is the measurer, and he'll be timing you during each section. He has been performing this job for fifty years, so please treat him with respect."

The kind-looking measurer bowed.

The measurer was an occupation that elementary, middle, and high schools required for their practical exams. They had one duty—to take accurate readings during exams.

Being a measurer required visual acuity of 20/6 or better, reflexes within 0.2 seconds, and an ability to record time within a 0.01 second margin of error. As a result of these strict standards, there were never enough measurers to meet the great demand present throughout the country.

"For reference, the average time for our first-years is approximately 0.8 seconds. Just keep that in mind," Chairwoman Reia noted.

She took a notebook and pen out of her chest pocket to record the results.

"Let's get moving. First up—Lia Vesteria!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

After being called first, Lia stood in front of a stalk of bamboo and closed her eyes.

Silence filled the room for a few seconds.

“Hah!”

A sharp flash raced through the air, rending the bamboo in front of her in half.

Everyone turned to the measurer.

“That’s 0.5 seconds. Hoh-hoh, impressive.”

We billowed in a wave of excitement. Lia’s time surpassed the first-year average by 0.3 seconds.

“All right!”

Lia made a triumphant pose, then rejoined the rest of the students.

“Starting off with a time like that is a sign of good things to come!

Next up is Rose Valencia!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Rose stood in front of the bamboo, bent down, and took a breath.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Lightning Sakura!”

A flash as fast as lightning ran through the air and sliced the bamboo in half.

“That’s 0.3 seconds. Incredible!”

The students all shouted in excitement. Rose’s time surpassed Lia’s already impressive record by another 0.2 seconds.

“Ha...I win this round.”

“Grrr...”

Lia looked visibly upset as Rose boasted about her victory. They seemed like really good friends already.

“Your Cherry Blossom Blade Style never ceases to impress. That was an excellent strike. Next up—Allen Rodol!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

My turn had finally arrived. Standing in front of one of the pedestals that had a stalk of bamboo set inside, I took a deep breath to prepare.

The draw strike...

If I recalled correctly, the academy record at Grand Swordcraft Academy was 1.2 seconds. This used to be my worst section, but now that I’d spent over one billion years training, I was curious to see my progress.

After I’d calmed my breathing and cleared my mind of all intrusive thoughts, I quickly drew my sword.

“Yah!”

I performed the fastest strike I was presently capable of.

“Wow!” the chairwoman exclaimed in admiration off to the side.

That felt great!

My strike had to have made a good time. I waited to hear the result.

“...”

...Huh?

For some reason, the measurer wasn’t showing any signs of sharing it.

"E-excuse me, how fast was that?" I asked timidly.

"...Huh?" he replied, dumbstruck.

"Um...I'd like to learn what my time was..."

"I want to know, too. Can you please tell us? The suspense is killing me," said Chairwoman Reia, asking for the result as well.

"I don't understand. What are you two talking about? He hasn't cut the bamboo yet," responded the perplexed measurer.

"I did cut the bamboo, though..."

I gently poked the bamboo stalk above where I'd cut it diagonally, and the top half fell to the floor. My classmates, who had been watching in silence, all gasped in surprise.

"N-no way...?!"

"I didn't see that at all..."

"When the heck did he cut it...?!"

Wide-eyed, the measurer raced over to the sliced bamboo.

"I-impossible! I've been working as a measurer for fifty years. How could I have not seen a draw strike?!"

Trembling, he repeatedly put the two halves of the bamboo together and then pulled them apart again... I might have been worried for his sanity had I not understood why he was doing so.

"I'm not sure what to do here. It seems my eyes can't perceive that speed..."

The chairwoman put her hand to her chin and thought.

"Hmm... We only have one option here. Please do it again, Allen, but more slowly this time."

"M-more slowly...?"

"Yes, please."

"Okay... Yes, ma'am."

I couldn't believe they were asking me to perform a slower draw strike in an exam judged by speed.

Once again, I stood in front of a freshly set stalk of bamboo, but only moderately prepared myself this time.

"Hah!"

I intentionally drew the sword from my scabbard more slowly and severed the bamboo.

"That's 0.1 seconds. If you were holding back this time...you're an incredible swordsman."

The proclamation of the best time so far sent another burst of excitement through the class.

"Great job, Allen!"

"S-so fast..."

I thought Lia looked proud, while Rose was chewing her lip in frustration.

"Hmm, let's consider Allen's time temporary for now. We know he

can easily beat 0.1 seconds,” the chairwoman announced.

After that, the rest of the class performed the test, but no one surpassed 0.1 seconds.

The next test was the ten-foe challenge. That section measured how quickly we could slice apart ten dummies placed in a vertical line. I used First Style, Flying Shadow. At two seconds, it broke the academy record.

The final test was the multistrike. In this section, we were tasked with striking four human vital points—the jaw, the heart, the liver, and the solar plexus—on an anatomical model. I did it in one second using Eighth Style, Eight-Span Crow. This was yet another academy record, which greatly impressed the chairwoman.

“That brings today’s practical exam to a close! You all did well. The gym is open for the rest of the day, so feel free to take advantage of it for practice swings, mock duels, strengthening your posture, or whatever else. Dismissed!” she declared, before leaving the gym.

Phew...that was fun.

It made me happy to see my progress quantifiably recorded.

Relieved the exam was over, I stretched, then saw a male student walking up to me. I recognized him after a moment as the boy who used the Slice Iron Style the previous day.

“Hey, Allen. That move you used during the ten-foe challenge was called Flying Shadow, right?”

“Yeah...why do you ask?”

“Uh, well... I was wondering if you’d be willing to teach me how to do it? I’ll train you in my Slice Iron School of Swordcraft in exchange!”

“Oh...sorry. I’m not a good enough swordsman to teach other people yet,” I said, politely rejecting his request.

“Surely, there’s something you can instruct me on! Maybe just a few small tricks? I’m begging you!” he pleaded, putting his hands together.

“Hmm...”

It would be rude to refuse him after he asked so desperately. Besides, it wasn’t like I was keeping my technique behind Flying Shadow a secret. I actually thought it would be great if other people mimicked it and found ways to improve upon it.

“...Fine. I’m not very good at teaching, so don’t expect too much, okay?”

“Seriously?! Thank you, Allen! I love you!”

As if they had been eavesdropping on our conversation, a number of students gathered around us.

“Hey, what the hell?! Don’t try to get the jump on us!”

“Allen, show me your moves, too! I don’t know if this is worthy repayment, but I’ll teach you as many New Moon Style moves as you

want!”

“I want to learn your techniques, too, Allen! I’ll teach you my Shimmering Water School of Swordcraft!”

“Sure, no problem,” I replied, gladly accepting everyone’s request.

“Wait, Allen, teach me, too!”

“Me too, please!”

Lia and Rose ran over a little later than the others and stood at my flanks.

We had a nice long chat about swordcraft, discussing how to use Flying Shadow, the essence of the Slice Iron Style, the basics of the New Moon Style, the movement of the Shimmering Water Style, a trick to speed up your draw strike a little, what I thought about when practicing my swings alone, and more. It was a great time, and we never ran out of swordcraft topics to discuss.

...Hey, this is what I’ve always wanted.

I was having a friendly conversation with everyone about the swordplay we all loved so much. This was a commonplace occurrence at swordcraft academies everywhere, something I’d always wanted more than anything to partake in myself.

During my three years at Grand Swordcraft Academy, I was always alone.

The horrible bullying I’d experienced had prevented me from chewing the fat about swordcraft with anyone. There hadn’t been even a single student I could call a friend. Yet now I was having a serious conversation about the art I loved, surrounded by friends.

Ah, I’m so happy... I’m so, so happy...

I lost myself thinking about the past and digesting the joy I’d finally obtained.

“...Allen, are you crying?” Lia asked, concerned.

I noticed that small tear droplets had formed in the corners of my eyes. It seemed I’d gotten a little too sentimental.

“Uh...no, I’m not. I just got a little dust in my eyes, is all.”

As I exaggeratedly rubbed my eyes, a boy asked a question while waving his blade around like a madman.

“Hey, Allen! How do you make a slash attack fly?”

“Ah-ha-ha. To perform Flying Shadow, you first have to hold your weapon like so—”

The joy I had longed for since childhood was finally in my hands.



The day after the practical exam was the anniversary of Thousand Blade Academy’s founding, so we had no classes. All the academy facilities were open despite the holiday. The training room and the

practice facility were likely packed with students.

It was currently seven in the morning. I ate breakfast with Lia, washed my face, brushed my teeth, and took care of the rest of my morning routine. Lia sat in the chair by her dresser and used red ribbons to tie her long, beautiful blond hair into elegant pigtails.

I glanced out of the window and beheld the campus bathed in warm sunlight.

Nice weather today. Perfect for training.

It felt like it had been forever since the last time I'd been able to practice with my sword alone. Lately, I'd been going from one duel to another with Lia and the three boys, and I'd built up a strong urge to swing my blade.

All right, I'm going to train from dawn till dusk today!

I finished getting dressed, secured my weapon at my hip, then noticed I had forgotten my water bottle.

Phew, that was close.

I had just grabbed the water bottle I put in the fridge last night when Lia spoke to me.

"Hey, Allen, are you free today?" she inquired with a cheerful smile.

...I really wish she hadn't asked me that way.

Whether or not I wanted to say I was free depended on what she was going to invite me to. I wished she'd told me her plans *before* posing the question.

How should I answer this...?

Judging from Lia's cheery mood, she was definitely going to invite me somewhere. I wasn't sure if it would be the training room or shopping in the capital, though.

I really don't know how to answer this...

I struggled to figure out what to say.

"...Sorry, are you busy?" she apologized, looking dejected.

Practice is important...but so is spending time with Lia. Spending time with friends.

I would be able to swing my sword any time, any place. But I couldn't say the same about hanging out with Lia.

She's also a princess. Vesteria may call for her return at any point.

After much consideration, I smiled to put her at ease.

"I'm free. I don't have anything planned today."

She put her hands together happily.

"Yay! Then let's go eat some ramzac!"

"Ram...what now?"

I felt like I'd heard that somewhere before...

"You already forgot? I just told you about it the other day. It's a traditional dish in Vesteria!"

Oh yeah, I think I recall her telling me about that.

“There’s a delicious ramzac restaurant nearby, so let’s go there for lunch!”

“That sounds great.”

And thus, I had plans set for noon. I expected we would end up going shopping after we ate, too. Unfortunately, it would be hard to find time for serious training today.

Occasional days off are all right, though.

I cast a glance at Lia from the corner of my eyes. She looked really happy.

We relaxed in the apartment until it was time for lunch.



Noon arrived about three hours later. Lia and I left the apartment to go to the ramzac restaurant in Aurest.

We were both wearing our Thousand Blade Academy uniforms. It wasn’t that I preferred it to plain clothes; rather, Thousand Blade Academy recommended that students wear their uniforms when leaving campus. Apparently, it was so we would always keep in mind that we were students of one of the Elite Five Academies. They wanted us to convey our consistent excellence as swordcraft students to the world.

That strictness was no surprise, considering how highly the Elite Five Academies valued tradition and formality.

Well, it is a recommendation and not a requirement.

I would have been fine with casual clothes, but...

“Allen, let’s go in our uniforms today!”

...Lia really wanted us to wear our academy attire, so that’s what we did. She’d insisted that *“the time we have in our lives to act carefree and wear uniforms is short.”*

That was one way to think about it. We made our way to the main street.

“The weather is so nice today!” Lia beamed, holding her right hand up to the sun.

“Yeah, it’s a perfect day for trai—for going out.”

I nearly slipped after being overcome for a moment by a strong urge to train, but I hurriedly corrected myself.

“...Were you just about to say training?”

Lia glared at me, homing in on my mistake. In response, I looked her directly in the eyes without backing down.

“Must have been your imagination. Not even I would think about swordcraft when going somewhere with you, Lia.”

That wasn’t a lie. I really hadn’t been thinking about it at all. An image of me wielding my blade had just flashed through my mind for

a moment.

As a possible side effect from swinging my sword single-mindedly for over a billion years, I tended to unconsciously desire getting practice swings in no matter where I was or what I was doing.

We stared each other down for four or five seconds.

“R-really...? Sorry for doubting you,” she muttered, blushing and diverting her eyes. She believed me.

“Don’t worry about it. More importantly, are we going the right way?”

“Y-yeah, I’ve been here plenty of times already, so I know where I’m going!”

“Good.”

We made small talk as we headed for the ramzac restaurant, then ran into an unexpected face.

“““...Oh,””” we all said in unison.

It was Rose, who was also wearing her uniform.

“Allen, Lia?”

“Hello, Valencia. What a coincidence meeting you here.”

“What are you two doing together on your day off? You seem really close already...”

She was glaring at both of us. Something was bothering her.

“U-um... We’re going to eat at a ramzac restaurant,” I clarified.

“...What’s that?” Rose questioned, confused. It looked like she’d never heard of it, either.

“Ramzac is a traditional food from Lia’s home country of Vesteria. Would you like to come with us, Valencia?”

“Huh...?” replied Lia, sounding flustered.

“Sure,” Rose answered quickly before walking up to stand beside me.

“Are you...? Fine. Follow me. It’s this way,” huffed Lia. I wasn’t sure why, but she appeared to be in a bit of a bad mood.

Rose and I followed after her.



We twisted and turned through the streets of Aures until Lia stopped before a restaurant.

“And we’re here. This is Vestland, my favorite restaurant!”

The restaurant was a brick building with a large chimney on top, giving it kind of a retro appearance.

“I like the vibe.”

“Yeah, it has a nice, quaint atmosphere.”

“Hmm-hmm, let’s go in.”

In a better mood now, Lia led us inside.

“Welcome. Is this a party of three?”

A female employee wearing a white chef's hat greeted us as soon as we entered. Lia nodded in response.

“Understood. Please follow me.”

Fortunately, there were open seats available, and we were led directly to a four-person table. Lia sat to my right, and Rose sat across from me.

The woman quickly brought us three glasses of water.

“Please feel free to call out to us as soon as you've decided on your order,” she noted, bowing politely before returning to the kitchen.

I took a look around the restaurant. It was noon, so many of the customers were here with their families, which gave it a warm and lively atmosphere.

The employees are very polite, and it seems like they have a good customer base. What a nice restaurant.

“Look, this is ramzac!”

Lia pointed excitedly to a picture of the dish printed on the menu.

“Ooh, that does look really good,” I said.

“It doesn't seem bad,” admitted Rose.

Going off this picture, ramzac appeared to be small triangles of piecrust stuffed with beef stew. Piecrust and beef stew—nothing sounded off-putting about that.

In fact, I was eager to try it.

“There's a lot on the side menu, but do you two want to just get ramzac this time since you've never been here?”

“Yes, please,” I answered.

“Sure,” added Rose.

We both nodded, and Lia lifted her right hand.

“Excuse me!”

The employee heard her and came right out of the kitchen.

“Are you ready to order?” she asked.

“Yes. We'd like a Ramzac Platter for three, please,” said Lia.

“Sure thing! We'll have it out for you shortly.”

The woman politely bowed, then rushed back to the kitchen.

“They pride themselves on the size of their ramzac dishes here! The food itself is delicious, too, of course!” explained Lia.

“Huh, sounds good,” I responded.

“I hope you like it!” she said.

After about ten minutes of small talk, the food arrived.

“Thank you for your patience! Here's your Ramzac Platter,” the employee announced, placing a plate piled with the stuff on the table.

“Wh-what the...?!”

“That's so many...!”

The plate was stacked with just over thirty ramzacs. However, the

amount wasn't the only thing that scared me.

What the heck...? These are waaay bigger than the one pictured on the menu!

The triangular pies were as big as two clenched fists put together, and they were each fit to burst with beef stew.

Normally, the real thing is smaller than the promotional photo...

The size of the pastries far exceeded my expectations. I wasn't sure we could down thirty of these.

"Hmm-hmm, isn't this amazing?" Lia asked, her eyes shining. Rose and I stared in dumbfounded amazement.

"Th-they do look delicious...but this is kind of a lot," I responded.

"Yeah, they smell good...but this is a ton of food," added Rose, sharing my sentiment.

"Let's eat them while they're hot!" exclaimed Lia.

We all put our hands together and gave our thanks for the food, then grabbed pieces and took a big mouthful.

"Mmm, this is heaven!" praised Lia.

"...This is delicious!" I added.

"It tastes amazing!" agreed Rose.

It was pleasantly chewy, and the beef was sweet. The thick stew was piping hot and rich in flavor, while the piecrust had a satisfyingly crisp texture. Ramzac was simply delicious.

"Right? It's really popular all throughout Vesteria!"

Lia was overjoyed to see us enjoying a traditional dish from her home country. I continued stuffing my cheeks with ramzacs until I eventually reached my tenth.

Oh my god... This may be the end...

I felt like I was waging war on this platter, staring down an army of enemy ramzac soldiers. I almost fainted in the face of a particularly large one. My dear companion Rose and I had waged a brave battle, but we were in dire straits. She'd collapsed with her face on the table, tightly clutching a pastry in one hand.

"Mmm, this takes me back!"

Lia was scarfing them down so quickly that they may as well have been nothing but liquid.

...Yeah, I'm done.

Some things were beyond human capability. I knew it was time to give in and abandon my conquest of the ramzacs. This wasn't fleeing in the face of the enemy—it was a tactical retreat. After abandoning the idea of doing my part to finish the plate, I let out a big sigh and locked eyes with Rose, who had just lifted her head.

"..."

"..."

We stared at each other without saying anything. It was...a little

uncomfortable, to be honest. I racked my brain for a conversation topic, but she broke the silence first.

“Something’s been bothering me. Why do you call me by my last name? You’re not doing that with anyone else.”

“...Hmm, I’m not sure why.”

Now that I thought about it, Rose was the only person in my class I was calling by her last name.

...*Why am I doing that?*

It might have been because she acted so mature, so I wanted to be polite. Or maybe it was because I met her under special circumstances at the Sword Fighting Festival.

I wasn’t sure of the reason, but I’d been using Rose’s last name every time I addressed her.

“It makes us feel like strangers, so please stop,” she insisted, glaring at me.

If someone referred to everyone by their first name except for me, I’d definitely feel alienated, too.

“Got it, I’ll call you by your first name from now on.”

“Let me hear you say it.”

“O-okay...Rose.”

“There you go, Allen,” she encouraged, smiling kindly. Since she wasn’t typically very expressive, seeing her grin so suddenly really brought out her charm. We continued to stare at each other until Lia interrupted.

“That was delicious!” Lia proclaimed. I noticed there wasn’t a single ramzac left from the mountain we’d been given. The enemy had been soundly defeated.

“A-amazing...”

I sat there in stunned silence, unable to comprehend that she’d finished so much food on her own.

“Come on, let’s go to the next store!”

She got up and walked briskly over to the cashier. I didn’t know if it was my imagination, but it looked a little like her feelings had been hurt.

“Hey, wait up, Lia!”

“Tch...”

Rose and I chased after her.



After having our fill of Vesterian delicacies, we checked out a bunch of spots around town, including an aquarium, a candy shop, a general store, and a boutique. Lia and Rose were both as enthusiastic as you would expect for girls their age. It was very cute.

We were currently in the most famous jewelry store in all of Aurest.

“Wow, that’s so pretty! Look at this, Allen!” Lia gawked, showing me a diamond ring on her hand.

“U-uh, yeah... It looks good on you...,” I responded with an awkward smile.

“Allen, how do I look?” Rose asked, wearing a platinum necklace while balancing a pendant in both hands.

“U-uh, those are pretty! They look great on you, but make sure not to drop them, okay?!” I answered in a panic.

These items were all for sale, and a store employee was enthusiastically encouraging the girls to try them on.

I would have bet that the employees knew Lia was a princess of a neighboring country and that Rose was the famed Bounty Hunter. It was obvious from how fervently they were pushing the two to make a purchase.

I slowly followed behind the two girls, being very mindful of the products on display around us.

Lia and Rose aren’t fazed at all by this place, considering how rich they are...

If I happened to break one of the items in here, that would be the end for me. I would be burdened with debt so massive, there was a chance I would have to withdraw from the academy and probably also have to look for a job immediately.

There’s no way I’d let that happen. I wouldn’t be able to look Mom and Ms. Paula in the face...

Feeling as anxious as I’d been in my entire life, I weaved through the store one step at a time.

What terrified me more than anything was the total lack of price tags on any of the products.

They’re probably expensive enough to make me faint on the spot...

A little while later, I sat down on a bench at the end of the store, overcome by massive mental fatigue.

“Sorry, I’m gonna take a break. I’m a little tired,” I called out to Lia and Rose from a bit of a distance.

“Are you okay?!”

“I had no idea you were getting tired... Are you ill?!”

Still clad in very pricey jewelry, they both rushed over to me.

"I-I'm okay! I just got a little dizzy, I swear! You two just relax and have fun... And please be careful not to break any of those things!" I yelled, putting up both hands to stop them from running.

"Y-you're really okay?"

"There's no need to act tough for us."

"Don't worry about me, please! I'll be fine after a little rest!"

It seemed that I finally convinced them.

"If you say so..."

"Tell us right away if you're feeling sick, okay?"

They turned around and resumed making friendly conversation.

"Hey, Rose, how many months' salary do you want him to spend? The standard three?"

"Three is ideal, but the thought is most important. I honestly wouldn't mind if he didn't give me one, worst-case scenario."

"Wow...you'd be a surprisingly devoted partner."

"You think so?"

I had no idea what they were talking about, but it looked like they were having a lot of fun.

I didn't realize until today what great shape they're both in...

We'd been standing and walking for hours at this point, but Lia and Rose still had plenty of energy. To be fair to myself, I had just been subjected to a significant mental burden, but I wouldn't have thought I'd be the first to go down.

I wonder if it's because I'm not used to shopping.

As I was watching them absentmindedly, the store's windows suddenly shattered, and a piercing siren began to blare.

"Wh-what the heck?!"

Quickly turning toward the windows, I saw ten sword-wielding men with black masks step into the store.

"Don't move! Everyone, shut up and put your hands in the air!"

They were obviously burglars.

Did this have to happen now? I have such bad luck...

I decided to comply with their orders for the time being. There were many unarmed civilians here among the customers and employees. Making the wrong move and provoking the crooks could lead to disaster.

After gaining control of the store, the robbers handed a leather bag to a female employee and put a sword to her throat.

"Fill this with all the jewelry you have, woman!"

"P-please don't kill me..."

She shook her head weakly, unable to stand due to fear.

"...Tch, useless bitch!"

"AAH!"

One of the burglars sliced the woman in the back with his sword.

I shot up immediately.

I was going to overlook the robbery to prioritize the safety of everyone here, but...

If they were going to hurt people, I needed to act.

Rose and I drew our swords at the same time, and Lia produced her Soul Attire.

“Conquer—Dragon King Fafnir!” Lia shouted. She produced a beautiful crimson sword, and black and white flames danced all around her.

“Wh-who the hell are you all?!”

The burglars turned their attention to us.

“Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!”

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash!”

“Hegemonic Style—Hard Strike!”

We all leaped into action simultaneously and overpowered our foes with a wave of strong attacks.

“Gah...”

“What the...hell...?”

“M-monsters...”

We took out nine people with our first move. That left just one.

“Wh-who are these little...? Dammit!”

The last burglar grabbed a jewel on display and took off as fast as he could.

“St-stop!”

“You’re not getting away!”

Lia and Rose began to take off after him.

“U-urgh...”

However, they came to a halt when the injured female employee groaned.

“Sh-she’s the first priority...”

“...We have to let him go.”

As they both sheathed their swords in regret, I raised mine overhead.

“Don’t worry. He’s still in my range,” I reassured.

There was no way I could let him get away with this.

“First Style—Flying Shadow!”

I sent a slash rippling through the air in a straight line.

“Gah, hah!”

It struck the burglar directly in the back of the head, instantly knocking him unconscious.



It was the next day. An article was printed in the newspaper with the

headline *Thousand Blade Academy Students Stop Jewelry-Store Burglary!* I had no idea when the clear picture that accompanied the article was taken. It was a magnificent shot of Lia and Rose bravely wielding their swords. The image of two girls with unrivaled beauty springing to action in the face of danger was stirring. As for me, though...

"I-I'm so small..."

...I was only visible as a tiny speck behind Lia and Rose. The article neglected to even mention me, saying that "two" Thousand Blade Academy students had saved the day.

I guess it doesn't matter...

To my relief, the end of the story explained that the injured employee only suffered light wounds and would be released from the hospital the next day.



A few days later, the Elite Five Holy Festival was fast approaching. Lia, Rose, and I had been summoned abruptly to the chairwoman's office, and we were talking on the way.

"I can't believe this... She interrupted our lunch!" pouted Lia.

Just as she'd complained, the three of us had been enjoying a meal together when we were suddenly called over the academy's intercom.

"Hey, calm down. You know anger clouds judgment...and Chairwoman Reia is a busy person," I chided.

The chairwoman was certainly...unique, but she was one of the most powerful people in the country. On top of being the head of one of the Elite Five Academies, she was inexplicably serving as the homeroom teacher for Class 1-A. *Busy* probably didn't begin to describe her schedule.

"I-I'm sure she is, but she didn't have to call us during our break..." Lia growled in frustration.

"Ah-ha-ha, well, this is just one of those days," I responded.

Lia clearly cherished our lunchtime together.

We kept chatting as we headed down a long hallway to the chairwoman's office.

This is probably about the Holy Festival being held this weekend...

The three of us being summoned together all but confirmed that. The academy matchups had also been announced in today's paper.

Thousand Blade Academy's first opponent was going to be Ice King Academy.

Admittedly, the name Ice King Academy doesn't really mean anything to me...

I didn't know of any famous students attending the place, what kind of swordcraft academy it was, or what its accomplishments were—I

really couldn't tell you a single thing about it. That wasn't unique to Ice King Academy—I honestly didn't know anything about any of the other Elite Five Academies, either.

Before pressing the 100-Million-Year Button, they might as well have existed beyond the clouds above my head. Most people didn't go out of their way to study up on things that would have no relevance to their lives.

I'd always thought that if I had time to research something trivial, I would be better off spending it getting a few more practice swings in.

Still doesn't feel real that I'm participating in the Elite Five Holy Festival...

Life is truly unpredictable.

I'll just do the absolute best that I can!

I wanted to give my all in this competition, to at least ensure I didn't hold Lia and Rose back and sully the name of Thousand Blade Academy.

The door to the office was black and projected a dignified aura. Chairwoman Reia seemed to be fond of the color. I knocked three times to announce our arrival and heard a quick "enter" in response. It sounded different from her regular voice—more formal and businesslike.

The three of us shared a look, then slowly opened the door.

"Excuse us."

We walked inside to find the chairwoman sitting behind a luxurious black desk. She was going through some papers, her eyebrows creased in thought. Her office was surprisingly neat, and the stacks of paper on her desk clearly demonstrated how wrapped up in work she was.

"Sorry, I can't put this down right now. Please wait a moment," she muttered without even glancing at us. She turned the page.

"Y-yes, ma'am."

I stood by the wall to wait quietly, and Lia and Rose followed my example.

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None of us said a peep. Only the noise of the chairwoman turning pages broke the silence.

*Those must be some really important documents...*

She was so immersed that she was hardly even blinking. This was the first time I'd seen her look so serious.

*I knew she would be really busy.*

Reia was the chairwoman of one of the Elite Five Academies, and she was serving as a homeroom teacher at the same time. The mere thought of the amount of work she handled every day would make the average person faint. Despite that, she always kept a cheerful attitude in front of her students in order to make our class enjoyable. I greatly

respected her for that.

*She's such a professional...*

I found myself thinking she looked cool as we waited.

*"Phew..."*

The chairwoman put down her papers, exhaled, and stretched widely. She must have reached a stopping point.

The atmosphere in the room immediately lightened. Reia rolled her shoulders to get them loose, and I gave her words of encouragement.

*"Good work, Chairwoman."*

*"Thanks. That was a really fun issue."*

Flashing a satisfied smile, she drained her teacup.

*"That's good to... Wait, 'fun'? 'Issue'?"*

I didn't know what she was talking about, but *fun* didn't seem like an appropriate response after getting through work. Finding that odd, I looked at the papers on her desk and saw an issue of *Weekly Shonen Blade*.

*Weekly Shonen Blade* was a manga magazine that boasted massive popularity among boys in middle and high school. Reia hadn't been working; she had just been absorbed in reading comics.

*"Man, Blade was really good overall this week! The stand-alone story was especially amazing! Mark my words—that's going to become a killer series! The illustration's rough, and the writing needs work, but I felt such passion, such soul radiating from the pages!"*

The chairwoman raved like a young boy about the comics she'd just finished, eyes shining and cheeks flushed.

*"...Interesting."*

I felt ashamed that I'd allowed myself to think even for a moment that she was "cool." She made us wait all that time just so she could read for fun... To say I was pissed would be an understatement.

Lia and Rose sighed in unison. They were in disbelief, too.

*Will our academy really be okay with her at the reins?*

Feeling a little anxious at that thought, I decided to just ask her what was on my mind.

*"What are you doing about your work, Chairwoman? I wouldn't have thought someone serving as both chairwoman and a homeroom teacher would have time for reading manga..."*

*"Not to worry, I've got that covered! I pass all my busy work on to him."* She giggled, boastfully directing her gaze to the corner of the room.

*"..."*

There, a man was sitting in a small chair, quietly doing paperwork.

*"Huh?!"*

*"Wha?!"*

*"Wh-who's that?!"*



Lia and Rose leaped back from shock, and I immediately jumped in front of them.

*How long has he been there...?!*

None of us had even noticed his presence until now. I didn't know it was possible for a person to stand out so little.

"Ha-ha-ha, you should see your faces!"

The chairwoman laughed at our expense.

"Wh-who is this man?"

"I'll introduce him. He's the servant who handles my busy work—his name is Eighteen."

"E-Eighteen...?"

I scrutinized the strange man working away in the corner of the room.

He looked to be in his midthirties. Despite being indoors, he wore a top hat, and a magnificent handlebar mustache rested on his upper lip. He also had an odd black-and-white walking stick propped against the desk.

Eighteen gave us a slight bow without even looking up. He was flying through the stack of documents in front of him at lightning speed, not letting up for even a second.

I approached him, thinking I should at least introduce myself, but Chairwoman Reia stopped me.

"Careful. He's a class A criminal sentenced to one hundred years of penal servitude," said the chairwoman casually.

""""HUH?!"""" the three of us exclaimed in unison. We all backed away from him together.

"His prisoner number is 0018—so I call him Eighteen. That's clever, right?"

The chairwoman heaped praise on herself for her perfect naming sense.

"Reia! What the heck are you doing pulling people out of prison?!" asked Lia accusingly.

"Eighteen is my servant. He carries out a wide range of tasks for me, including document preparation, handling my contacts, adjusting my schedule, and more!" she boasted, as if she had nothing to be ashamed of.

That explained why she had so much free time—she was delegating all her labor to Eighteen.

"One hundred years of work is a heavy punishment... What exactly did this guy do?" asked Rose.

"He peeped," the chairwoman answered without hesitation.

I certainly didn't see that answer coming.

"By 'peeping'...do you mean, like, spying on girls in the locker room or in the bath—that kind of peeping?" I asked for confirmation.

“Yeah, exactly. This fellow has a great fondness for the female form—especially when it comes to young girls in their teens. Before his apprehension, he devoted his life to traveling around the country’s various academies to commit his crimes of indecency. According to testimony, he’s peeped in this academy’s bathhouse on numerous occasions,” Chairwoman Reia explained.

Lia and Rose scowled at Eighteen as if he were a piece of disgusting trash.

“What a scumbag...,” growled Lia.

“An enemy of women,” concurred Rose.

Their eyes were full of contempt. They clearly wanted nothing to do with him.

Nevertheless, there was one thing that didn’t make sense to me.

“Peeping is definitely an intolerable crime, but...does it really deserve one hundred years of penal servitude?”

That much time was basically a death sentence. I’d never heard of anyone receiving such a harsh punishment for voyeurism.

“Hmm, to put it simply...Eighteen is a graduate of this academy. It should be evident how talented a swordsman he is. Though he was occasionally caught in the act, most holy knights were no match for him, so he peeked hundreds of times before he was finally arrested.”

He sounded like a truly elite Peeping Tom.

“Whenever they did actually manage to throw him into a prison cell, he would simply break out. Apparently, he would tear off the iron bars with his bare hands or use the wooden chopsticks he would receive with lunch as swords to slice through the wall.”

The chairwoman shrugged in disbelief.

“Between all the time he spent being a voyeur and busting out of jail, his sentence built up to a hundred years.”

“I—I see...”

Eighteen was both a pervert willing to put his life on the line for a sick thrill and a very talented swordsman.

“Wh-what are you doing letting someone like him go unchecked?!” Lia yelled, voicing a reasonable objection. Rose nodded in agreement.

Being the young women they were, they were obviously very upset at the fact that there was a Peeping Tom present within the academy’s walls.

“Don’t worry. He’s totally harmless now. I gave him a thorough education... Isn’t that right, Eighteen?” the chairwoman leered, patting him on the shoulder.

“O-of course, Mistress Reia!”

He stood up to bow, finally breaking his silence. His entire body was quivering, and his face was deathly pale.

*Just what was this education...?*

I was really intrigued, but too frightened to ask. Some things were better left unknown.

“Eighteen is quite smart and talented. He has doctorates in three entirely different fields. Long story short, a few things led to me discovering him and summoning him here by using my authority as the chairwoman. I’ve been making him help me with work ever since. I promise you he’s completely harmless. There’s nothing for you all to worry about,” the chairwoman insisted.

“I-if you say so...,” I responded.

I could think of a number of things to worry about, not the least of which included an information leak or him escaping and peeping within the academy...but if Reia insisted he was harmless, I had no choice but to believe her. Lia and Rose didn’t look totally convinced, either, but they didn’t press her any further about it.

“Whoops, we got off track there. Lunch break is almost over, so let’s get down to business.”

The chairwoman cleared her throat and continued speaking.

“I’m sure you’ve guessed this already, but I summoned you here today to discuss the Elite Five Holy Festival. As was announced in this morning’s paper, our first opponent is the accursed Ice King Academy!”

She clenched her fists and twisted her face in undisguised hatred.

“Oh yeah, you three are new here and probably don’t know our history very well yet. We’ll touch on some of this in class, but I’ll give you a short explanation now.”

She took a short pause and continued:

“We once had a spectacular rivalry with Ice King Academy. Both sides placed in the top two in every competition throughout the years, including the Holy Festival, and we would almost always take first. We beat them every year during my three years here as a student, which is now known as the ‘Golden Age’...,” the chairwoman muttered wistfully while seeming to stare off into the distance.

*I didn’t know she was a student here...*

After sharing this surprising fact, the chairwoman went on in a soft tone.

“But unfortunately, that prosperity didn’t last forever. A number of issues spurred Thousand Blade Academy’s downfall, and Ice King Academy followed us straight to the bottom. The public and the media ate it up and gave us a real flogging. People said we’d have to leave the capital, that this was the beginning of the end for us... The ridicule never ceased.”

She clenched her fists harder, and a crease formed on her brow. This must have been frustrating for her as a graduate.

“To make matters worse, we even started losing to Ice King

Academy. As you can see here, we've been placing last in every single tournament, and every time, we're one spot behind Ice King Academy."

Chairwoman Reia placed a paper on the desk with the results for the Elite Five Holy Festival and all the other tournaments.

...*She's right.*

While the order of the top three academies changed every year, the bottom two academies didn't budge at all. For more than a decade, Thousand Blade Academy had finished last, and Ice King Academy had finished fourth in every tournament.

"Our two prestigious academies dominating first and second place every year is now a thing of the past. Worst of all, once we came to occupy last place in every tournament..."

She paused briefly and then continued without a breath.

"...those jerks at Ice King Academy began to think they're better than us! They've been rubbing it in our face at every turn, surely as a way to vent their pent-up frustration from finishing second for so long. 'Thousand Toothpick Academy,' the 'shame of the Elite Five'—the insults never let up! They showed their true colors as soon as we had a moment of weakness!" she ranted.

"Th-that's unbelievable!"

"We can't let them get away with that...!"

I wasn't surprised to see Lia react that way, but even the levelheaded Rose was showing anger.

After the chairwoman finished her spiel, she took two or three breaths and summarized the situation.

"So what I'm saying is that we can't lose to Ice King Academy, no matter what. This is the first tournament since I took over as chairwoman. I want an overwhelming victory that will put those bastards in their place!"

Lia and Rose nodded in agreement.

"Last night, I pulled an all-nighter to come up with the best possible lineup for the tournament—take a look at this!"

The chairwoman slapped a paper labeled *Participants List* down on the desk. It read as followed: *First—Allen Rodol; Second—Rose Valencia; Captain—Lia Vesteria.*

*This is actually pretty reasonable for her.*

I feared she might have gotten carried away and put us in some totally nonsensical order, but it appeared that cooler thoughts prevailed.

*My role as the first will be to reveal the fighting style, moves, and attack patterns of our opponents.*

Of course, my number one priority would be winning. But if that proved difficult, I would switch my strategy to try to stave off defeat

as long as I could and lay bare as much information about my opponent as possible. That was the minimum the first needed to accomplish.

Rose was the second. As the sole inheritor of the Cherry Blossom Blade Style, she was the ace of our team. In the case that I lost the first match, she would fight the other team's first while making use of what we learned from my fight. From there, her goal would be to ride that momentum and take down their second and captain. The outcome of the match would hinge on her performance.

Lia rounded out our team as the captain. As the only one of us who could produce Soul Attire, her strength and adaptability was perfect for the role. She would be unbeatable if not for her tendency to get careless and cocky.

*In short, as the first, I need to exhaust the enemy as much as I can. As the second, Rose would enter the match after me, and as the captain, Lia would finish the job. It's a solid lineup.*

I nodded to show my satisfaction with the list, but Lia and Rose reacted differently.

"Reia, why is Allen the first? Wouldn't he make more sense as the captain?" asked Lia.

"I thought the same thing. The strongest fighter is usually the captain," added Rose.

*No way, Lia should be the captain. Either her or Rose.*

Lia was a princess of Vesteria who could produce the Soul Attire Fafnir, while Rose was only person trained in the Cherry Blossom Blade Style of Swordcraft. By contrast, I was the Reject Swordsman from Grand Swordcraft Academy—designating me as captain over them would just feel wrong.

The chairwoman grinned wickedly as if she was expecting that objection.

"Mwa-ha-ha, so you noticed—that's a key part of my strategy!"

""""Strategy?"""" the three of us all muttered together. She continued on, nearly frothing at the mouth.

"Like I said before, we have to defeat them. But I don't want just any old victory. No, I want to utterly humiliate in an absolute landslide the likes of which no one has ever seen!"

Lia and Rose nodded gravely, while I gave a strained laugh.

*Personally, I would rather go for a boring but certain win over a flashy and overpowering one...*

Clearly, the other three didn't feel the same, however. They were out for blood.

"As you all know, the Holy Festival pits teams of three against each other in one-on-one knockout-style matches. In other words, if our first defeats all three of their swordsmen, Ice King Academy will lose

without even facing our second or our captain!”

“Oh, I get it!” shouted Lia.

“That makes sense. If beating all three of them without losing a single fighter is the goal, then positioning Allen as the first is the best move,” agreed Rose.

“Ha-ha, right? Ice King Academy will never expect us to position our best fighter as our first! After suffering a humiliating three consecutive losses, they’ll think, *If their first is this strong, then what kind of monsters are their second and captain?!?*”

“That’s perfect, Reia! You really thought this through!”

“Thousand Blade Academy will haunt their worst nightmares... Not bad.”

Lia and Rose both looked delighted with her plan.

*Oh, come on, there’s no way I can do that...*

They were clearly overestimating me. I wasn’t sure if I could beat even one of them. I shook my head to object, but the chairwoman didn’t notice me at all.

“I can see them now, seething and grinding their teeth in anger from the humiliation of suffering three whoppings in a row! Mwa-ha-ha... Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Chairwoman Reia cackled.



The day of the Elite Five Holy Festival arrived. Chairwoman Reia inspected the list displaying the participants for Ice King Academy.

“Whuh...?! What the hell...? Are they mocking us?!”

She seethed and ground her teeth in anger.

## CHAPTER 5

# Ice King Academy & a Battle to the Death

A large sheet displaying the participants from each academy was posted on the bulletin board. The Ice King Academy column said the following:

*First: N/A    Second: Cain Material    Captain: Shido Jukurius*

Without even having to ask, I knew the chairwoman was angry with the N/A. Having one less person than the other team in a three-on-three knockout competition was a huge handicap. If you intended to take the match seriously, leaving a position empty was not an option.

*Filling out the lineup is a must, no matter how unskilled your candidates for your first may be.*

Even if the first stood no chance of winning, it was still important to have one so they could collect information about the opposing team. Despite that, Ice King Academy was intentionally gifting the first match to us. It was a clear taunt, a boast that they could handle us with just two swordfighters.

“Wh-what the hell?! Is this some kind of joke?!” yelled Lia.

“I don’t like it,” said Rose.

It wasn’t just the chairwoman who was infuriated; Lia and Rose were visibly frustrated as well.

*Even I’m feeling a little peeved...*

Swordsmen always took their matches seriously. They never took it easy on their opponent, no matter the difference in skill.

As we all trembled with anger, Chairwoman Reia hounded a female committee member.

“If that’s how they’re going to play this, I have a counter... I’m making a change to our lineup! We’ll go without a first or a second and make Allen our captain! We don’t need three or even two people

to take down the likes of Ice King Academy! Allen alone is enough!" she proclaimed.

Withering under the glare of the head of one of the Elite Five Academies, not to mention one of the most powerful people in the nation, the committee member responded timidly.

"M-my deepest apologies, but the deadline to make changes to your participants passed two days ago..."

"Why should that matter?! I'm not adding any new participants! This doesn't disadvantage Ice King Academy at all!"

"I—I am sorry, but the rules are the rules..."

The woman's voice faded to nearly a squeak in the face of the chairwoman's wrath.

*She shouldn't lose her temper right here...*

I was about to try to calm her down, but got interrupted.

"What a sad sight. It's always people who know they have no chance of winning who take out their anger on others."

A woman waltzed up to us, snickering at Reia.

"What was that?! ...I-is that you, Ferris?!"

"Long time no see, dear Reia."

This woman was apparently Ferris Dorhein, the chairwoman of Ice King Academy.

She wore a white and blue kimono that was as beautiful as snow. Her long, light-blue hair was tied into an elegant side bun and accented with an ornate hairpin modeled after a snowflake. Her skin was as clear as ice. Slanted, foxlike eyes completed her gorgeous face.

*She must be in her late twenties... She looks a little older than Chairwoman Reia.*

Two male students stood behind her. They were most likely our opponents today.

Veins bulged on Chairwoman Reia's head. She turned to Ferris and cracked her knuckles.

"You've really outdone yourself this time, *vixen*. I never would have dreamed you would pull such an underhanded trick."

"Oh, Reia, my dear, 'underhanded' is surely an exaggeration... We simply chose the number of participants we believed most appropriate... Got that, *musclehead*?"

They exchanged cutting insults for quite some time, their false smiles never leaving their faces.

"What's with all that makeup? Joining the circus?" spat Reia.

"Shut up, peabrain!" Ferris shouted in return.

They sounded like elementary school girls in a shouting match.

*To think they're in positions of power in this country...*

I feared Liengard's future had dark clouds on the horizon.

"Take note, *vixen*! Today will mark our return to the glory days of



Thousand Blade Academy!”

“Talk all you want! You’ll be in tears when we’re done with you!”

They both spun away from the other with a *hmpf*. It seemed their elementary school standoff had reached a momentary conclusion.

“Shido, Cain, let’s go!”

“Okay.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Ferris walked toward the Ice King Academy waiting room with the two boys in tow.

“We should get moving, too, Allen, Lia, Rose!” announced the chairwoman.

We then headed for the Thousand Blade Academy waiting room. With about thirty minutes to go before the beginning of the first match, we started on our final preparations.



As soon as we entered the waiting room, the chairwoman began to speak with a grim expression lining her face.

“Ferris has a number of reasons for submitting that insulting lineup.”

“She did it to provoke us, right?” asked Lia.

“Yeah, that has to be it,” agreed Rose.

The chairwoman nodded.

“That’s surely one of the reasons. But it’s more likely that her true intention is to use this as a show of strength.”

“You mean...a show of strength for us?” Lia asked.

Reia shook her head.

“No, I don’t think it’s for us. She’s probably issuing a challenge to the three higher-ranking Elite Five Academies. *We’re strong enough to defeat Thousand Blade Academy using only two swordsmen. We’re different this year.* That’s the message she wants to send.”

“Wh-what the hell?! She’s not even thinking about us?!” exclaimed Lia.

“She really isn’t taking us seriously...,” muttered Rose.

The chairwoman continued to elaborate.

“Ferris is cunning and treacherous, and she hates losing just as much as I do. She wouldn’t use just those two unless she had full confidence they would win. That vixen’s trust is not easy to earn, so they must be no ordinary swordsmen,” she scowled.

“Anyway, get yourself ready, Allen. Today’s opponents will be talented duelists the likes of whom you’ve never faced before.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I answered.

We heard the announcer begin to speak right after we finished

talking.

“The moment you’ve all been waiting for has finally arrived! The first match between Thousand Blade Academy and Ice King Academy is beginning!”

The Elite Five Holy Festival was about to start.

*This isn’t just my battle anymore.*

I was representing all the students in Thousand Blade Academy with this fight.

My heart began to throb, and the palms of my hands started to sweat.

*...A certain amount of tension is good. I feel ready.*

I did my best to pump myself up and get in the right state of mind.

“Good luck, Allen! I know you can do it!” exclaimed Lia, gripping my hands tight.

“Thanks. I’ll give it my best shot.”

I gently squeezed her hands back and started to walk toward the stage.

“You better not lose, okay, Allen?” warned Rose, staring at me intently with her deep-crimson eyes.

“You got it, Rose.”

Finally, the chairwoman slapped me on the back.

“It’s time! Go kick his ass, Allen!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Then I heard the announcer begin to call the names of the participants.

“From the west gate, we have the first for Thousand Blade Academy—Allen Rodol!”

After being cheered on by my team, I walked onto the stage, confident I would win.

Nothing could have prepared me for what happened next.

“THERE HE IS!!! YOU CAN DO IT, ALLEN!!!”

“SHOW ICE KING ACADEMY WHAT YOU’RE MADE OF!!!”

“WIN THIS FOR US!!!”

Thousand Blade Academy’s spectator seating on the west side was packed. It looked like Class 1-A, the other first-year classes, and my upperclassmen from years two and three had all come to watch.

*Wow... This is nothing like the last time I faced a crowd of this size.*

The atmosphere here could not have been more different from when I’d dueled Dodriel at Grand Swordcraft Academy. Each person in that gymnasium had been hoping for my unsightly defeat.

*But this time is different!*

Everyone was cheering me on. Everyone was supporting me. Everyone was praying for my victory.

*I...I’m no longer alone!*

My painful, lonely battle was over. From now on, I had people fighting by my side, and people to fight for.

*...I'm gonna win this thing.*

As I waited calmly for my opponent, my thirst for victory grew ever stronger.

“Now, from the east gate, we have the second for Ice King Academy—Cain Material!”

Deafening cheers erupted from Ice King Academy’s spectator seating on the east side.

“AAAH, I LOVE YOU, CAIN! LOOK OVER HERE!”

“HE’S SO HANDSOME! YOU CAN DO IT, CAIN!”

“TAKE DOWN THOUSAND BLADE ACADEMY BY YOURSELF!”

Cain Material emerged to thunderous cheer.

He was a handsome boy, clad in the blue Ice King Academy uniform, with black-rimmed glasses and a silver pendant shaped like a cross hanging from his neck.

*...He looks used to the limelight.*

Cain waved his right hand in response to the squeals of adoration resounding from the crowd, betraying not a hint of anxiety on the big stage as he took one firm step after another. It was obvious he was a truly dangerous opponent.

He joined me at the center of the arena.

“Are you both ready? On my mark—begin!”

The announcer declared the start of the match.

I quickly drew my sword and held it in front of my navel, taking the versatile middle stance—a fundamental posture that would allow me to immediately defend, evade, or counter in response to whatever action he took.

Cain clenched his hands together and kneeled as if praying. Suddenly, I got a very bad feeling.

*D-don't tell me...?!*

“Ensnare—Hundred Hellblade!”

A large rift opened in midair and released a sword.

The blade was twisted to look like a clock hand, and it emanated some kind of repulsive pressure.

“S-Soul Attire...?!”

I was stunned. The captain being able to produce Soul Attire wouldn’t have been surprising, but I never would’ve expected their second to also be capable of the feat.

Cain stroked his sword lovingly and gave me a sharp look.

“The time of judgment has arrived. You’re finished!”

Not giving me any time to collect myself, he charged at me immediately.

*H-he’s fast!*

Cain was every bit as skilled as you'd expect of someone representing one of the Elite Five Academies. It wasn't just that he could produce Soul Attire; his physical ability was at a high level as well. His speed was greater than Lia's, albeit inferior to Rose's.

"Face divine judgment!"

Rushing toward me as fast as he could, he thrust his sword straight ahead.

*He's definitely fast, but...he's leaving himself open to attack...!*

On his current course, his sword would only graze my shoulder. My weapon, however, would gouge his chest.

*The reward is worth the risk!*

I would lose the battle but win the war. Steeling myself for a certain amount of pain, I took one step forward.

"No, Allen! Dodge!"

I heard Chairwoman Reia cry out.

"Too slow!" yelled Cain.

The tip of his sword lightly pierced my skin.

"Heh-heh—farewell, you sorry fool."

My consciousness faded to black.



When I came to, I found myself standing in an unfamiliar setting.

"Huh...? Where am I...?"

I was fighting Cain in the Holy Festival...and then...

"...Right. I fainted after being cut by his Soul Attire."

I looked around and found a small, slightly dingy house.

One more thing caught my eye—there were numbers in the sky.

*Year 99 Month 12 Day 31 23:59:42.*

The seconds were ticking down one by one. It was probably a clock displaying the amount of time this world had left.

"This couldn't be the World of Time...could it?"

The atmosphere of the place slightly resembled it.

*...I assume this happened because of an ability of his Soul Attire—Hundred Hellblade.*

From what I could gather, that ability trapped any person slashed by the sword in this place for one hundred years, only letting them out when the clock hit *Year 0 Month 1 Day 1 00:00:00*.

*Welp...might as well give it a try.*

If this was indeed the same as the World of Time, or at least similar in structure, I expected I would be able to *cut through it*. Concentrating only moderately, I brought my sword down without using anywhere close to my full strength.

"Hah!"

The air my blade passed through swayed massively.

*All right...it worked!*

That meant I could break out of here whenever I wanted.

*But that would feel like a waste, though...*

I'd just been gifted one hundred years. There was no way I would let it go to waste.

*I should explore the surrounding area first.*

Since this was both my second time dealing with this kind of experience, and because I had already confirmed I had a way out, I was able to remain calm. I spent an hour investigating things.

I concluded that this realm was also a small sphere. Leaving the run-down house and walking in a straight line quickly brought me to the house's back door. Fortunately, I was relieved to find that the house provided me with everything I would need to live, even if it was all poor-quality stuff.

I had the bare minimum of food, a bathtub just barely large enough for me to stretch my legs in, and an old futon and blanket.

"That works for me."

It wasn't as luxurious as the World of Time, but it was more than plenty to live on.

I now had a handle on my current situation.

"All right, time to practice!"

You didn't get this chance every day, so I decided to make full use of this world. Knowing that I could leave whenever I pleased put my mind at ease. Since I didn't feel trapped by fear, impatience, distress, or any other negative emotions, I could focus on my swordcraft without distraction.

I swung my sword every single day for the next ten years. Before every slash, I would calm my breathing, raise my blade, and swing it back down. I'd repeated that movement trillions of times in my life. Each swing seemed to cleanse my heart.

*Ahhh, this is bliss...*

With no one to interfere, I trained in absolute peace. Nothing else satisfied me like this. I ate, slept, and waved my blade. I was truly living the life...but there was one thing that never stopped stressing me out.

*I only have ninety more years?!*

I couldn't stop worrying about my remaining time. The clock in the sky read *Year 89 Month 7 Day 10 19:15:00*, so I already had less than ninety years left in this world.

*There are still so many things I want to do... I need to hurry!*

I reached twenty, thirty, and then forty years in this world at what felt like lightning speed. Shortly after I surpassed fifty years, the fruits of my training began to show.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash!”

“Slice Iron Style—Rust Remover!”

“Cloudy Sky Style—Cirrocumulus Cloud!”

I thought back on the basic principles, forms, and essences of the schools of swordcraft my classmates in Class 1-A told me about and succeeded at recreating their techniques. Though I had to rely on my memory of watching Rose to teach myself the Cherry Blossom Blade Style, I was able to pick up on it surprisingly quickly.

However, I was still hopeless when it came to producing Soul Attire. I just didn’t know the method to call it forth, nor did I understand how I should train to enable myself to create it.

*I wonder if we’ll get to it in class soon...*

I spent that day, too, swinging my sword in silence.

At last, the clock eventually reached *Year 0 Month 1 Day 1 00:00:01*.

One second later, the world began to noisily crumble around me.

“No way...? It’s already over...?”

My time here really passed by in a flash. The first one-hundred-million-year loop had irrevocably altered my sense of time; a century now felt way too short.

*I haven’t done a tenth of what I wanted to do yet...*

I couldn’t wrap my mind around it.

*I satisfied my desire to swing my sword, but...I want to train so much more...*

I tried to think of a way to stop the world from dissipating, yet no matter how much I racked my brains, I couldn’t find an answer. That shouldn’t have been surprising—after all, swords were made for cutting, not putting things back together.

*Guess I have no choice but to give up...*

I sighed as the realm around me continued to fall apart. Then an idea suddenly flashed through my mind.

*No, there’s still a chance. I don’t know for sure that this is over!*

Maybe this world looped every hundred years, just like how pushing the 100-Million-Year Button allowed me to repeat the experience!

It was too early to abandon hope.

*Please, please...*

I closed my eyes in prayer, then slowly opened them again...and saw Cain expelling his Soul Attire.

*I’m clearly back in the real world...*

Unfortunately, the hundred years of bonus time had not looped.

*Sigh, that would have been way too good to be true...*

I slumped my shoulders in disappointment while Ice King Academy’s section of the venue burst into applause.

“HE’S AMAZING! HE BEAT HIM IN ONE HIT!”

“I LOVE YOU, CAIN! KEEP IT UP!”

“Ha-ha, Thousand Blade Academy is surely going to withdraw. They have to be shaking in their boots after that match!”

They were all as jazzed as if Cain had already won.

*Wh-what’s going on...?*

As I was trying to wrap my mind around the situation, the referee approached me with a look of pity.

“Hundred Hellblade is a truly dreadful Soul Attire. It’s a real shame to see it used on someone so young... Should I declare you incapable of continuing?”

I couldn’t fathom why, but he looked at me sympathetically as he gently recommended that I withdraw.

“Wh-why would I want that? We’re just getting started!”

I hadn’t done anything yet. Withdrawing now would be a joke.

“...Huh?”

The referee’s eyes widened in shock.

“Y-you can talk...?! Can you actually do this?! Are you in a sound mental state?!”

“Huh...? I don’t really know what you mean, but I’m gonna keep fighting, okay?”

“U-understood...,” he acknowledged and quickly trotted off the stage.

I gazed at Cain, who seemed to already think he had won. Inexplicably, he had sheathed his sword and turned his back on me.

*Attacking an opponent while their guard is down isn’t exactly honorable, but we are in the middle of a match...*

Choosing not to take advantage of such a clear opening was an insult to your opponent.

*There’s only one thing for me to do—give him everything I’ve got!*

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style Secret Technique—Mirror Sakura Slash!”

I unleashed four identical slices from each side, each of them faster than the eye could see. This was the secret technique that Rose had used on me in the Sword Fighting Festival, where we first met.

But it wasn’t a total copy of her maneuver—I also put my own twist on it. It was no longer a chain of eight slashes like before, but instead eight concurrent cuts like Eight-Span Crow.

“...Huh?”

Cain noticed the eight slashes closing in on him from behind.

“GAH!!!”

He opened his eyes wide in astonishment as they all hit home.

“Argh...”

Although he tried to get up, he could do no more than writhe on the ground. He’d probably suffered a slight concussion.

Cain pointed at me with a trembling hand and unfocused eyes.

“H-how did you...?! You should have been imprisoned in that empty hell for a hundred years... How are you conscious?! How is your mind not broken?!”

I ignored his incoherent babbling and lodged a complaint.

“Cain, one hundred years is a little short...”

If I ever got another chance to go to that world, he should at least add a loop function.

I made my request and patted him lightly on the head.

“Wh-what nonsense...”

The referee then confirmed that Cain had fainted before loudly declaring the result of the match.

“Cain Material is defeated! Allen Rodol is the victor!”

The Thousand Blade Academy section of the crowd burst into cheers.

“WHOOOOO! HE WON!”

“WAY TO GO, ALLEN! YOU’RE AMAZING!”

“THAT’S OUR FIRST! TAKE DOWN THEIR CAPTAIN!”

I raised my right hand high in response to everyone’s applause.



After defeating Cain, I returned to the Thousand Blade Academy waiting room.

“That was so amazing, Allen!” exclaimed Lia.

“You did a great job overcoming his mental-manipulation Soul Attire! Your force of will is something else!” said Chairwoman Reia.

Lia and the chairwoman praised me profusely.

“Thank you... I’m surprised you were able to realize what kind of Soul Attire he had, Chairwoman,” I responded.

“Ha, as you can surely tell, I’m an experienced gal. All I need is a simple glance to guess what type an opponent’s Soul Attire is.”

“Wow... That’s impressive.”

It didn’t surprise me in the slightest to hear that she was a veteran fighter.

*There’s no doubt that she’s strong...*

During the practical exam, Reia had witnessed my draw strike that not even a veteran measurer had been able to perceive. Eighteen—an incredibly powerful, perverted swordsman who could destroy iron bars with his bare hands and cut through walls with wooden chopsticks—showed no hint of defiance toward her. She’d also won every single tournament when she’d been a student, establishing the Golden Age of Thousand Blade Academy.

*I wonder just how strong she actually is.*

As a swordsman, I was quite intrigued.



*I might ask her for a match after the Holy Festival is over.*

Rose jerked me out of my thoughts by tugging on my uniform.

“...Allen, care to tell me when you started mimicking my swordcraft?” she grumbled indignantly.

“Uh, well...”

I detailed everything that happened during the fight.

I told them that Cain’s Hundred Hellblade had imprisoned me in another world for one hundred years; that I’d had the bare minimum I’d needed to survive, and that I hadn’t wanted for anything; that I’d thought back on the fundamentals, forms, and essences of the schools of swordcraft our classmates had told me about and had learned everyone’s techniques; and finally, that I’d had to learn the Cherry Blossom Blade Style from my memories of watching Rose because she’d never taught it to me herself.

“I-it took me long years of study to learn the Cherry Blossom Blade Style...and you learned it through imitation...?!”

At a loss for words, she bit her bottom lip in frustration.

Though I didn’t really do anything wrong, I felt kind of bad.

“U-um, well...the move I used was a little different from your Mirror Sakura Slash. I combined it with Eight-Span Crow, so it’s not like I completely copied you—”

“So you *did* change it... That’s why it was so much more effective than mine...,” Rose interrupted.

I was trying to make her feel better, but I ended up sending her into an even worse spiral.

“...”

“...”

An uncomfortable silence grew between us. I had no idea what to say. Lia and the charwoman were flashing me dirty looks, clearly demanding that I do something to fix this.

*Wh-what can I do...?*

I racked my brain for an idea that would lift Rose’s spirit.

“...O-oh yeah! If you want, I’ll teach you the Mirror Sakura Slash I just used,” I proposed.

“Really?!” Rose asked, lifting her head immediately. That clearly worked.

“Yeah. It was your move originally, so it’s only fair.”

“Th-thank you...!”

She broke into a joyful smile.

*Thank goodness. Looks like that cheered her up.*

Shortly after I somehow managed to make amends, we heard the announcer’s voice ring out.

“Thank you for your patience, everyone. The second match between Thousand Blade Academy and Ice King Academy is about to begin!”

“Good luck, Allen. We’ll be rooting for you!” said Lia.

“Keep it up, Allen,” added Rose.

“You’re really strong. Go out there with your head held high!” urged the chairwoman.

“Thank you, I will!” I responded.

With support from Lia, Rose, and Chairwoman Reia, I once again headed for the stage.

“From the west gate, we have the first for Thousand Blade Academy—Allen Rodol!”

I heard a roar the moment I stepped onto the stage.

“IT’S ALLENNNNNNN!”

“YOU HAVE TO BEAT HIM! FOR ALL OF US!”

“WE CAN REALLY DO IT THIS TIME! LET’S GOOOOOOOO!”

Raucous cheers rose from the Thousand Blade Academy seating. My last win had probably given them real hope that I could do this.

“And now from the east gate, we have the captain for Ice King Academy—Shido Jukurius!”

Shido Jukurius slowly emerged from the other side of the venue after the announcer called his name.

He was wearing the long blue overcoat of the Ice King Academy uniform and stood slightly taller than me at about 168 centimeters tall. His snow-white hair was cut at a moderate length, and his skin was tan. He had sharp, piercing eyes, and a ferocious face that foretold violence.

Ice King Academy’s section of the crowd went dead silent the moment he appeared. Oddly, there was no cheering or applause whatsoever. It was uncomfortably quiet.

Shido paid it no heed as he advanced to the center of the stage.

*He’s incredibly powerful. Far more so than anyone I’ve fought so far.*

I wasn’t sure how I knew that. I just felt some kind of...aura around him. The sort unique to people of great might.

Shortly after my eyes met Shido’s, the announcer did his best to pump up the crowd again.

“Ice King Academy did not register a first, making Shido their captain. That means if Allen wins this match, Thousand Blade Academy will finally escape from its decade-long streak of last-place finishes!”

The Thousand Blade Academy spectators cheered even more loudly than before.

“According to my information, both duelists are self-taught! Neither one has ever had a teacher instruct them in the ways of the sword! This will surely be a wild match like no other!” proclaimed the announcer.

A section of the crowd began to ridicule us upon hearing that.

“Self-taught swordsmen? In modern times? *Pfft*, this is going to be a brutal one...,” I heard a man say.

The people mocking us were likely those general spectators who had no connection to either academy. It hurt to hear, but I couldn’t blame them for reacting this way. They had surely been itching to see one of the captains fight, which made it all the more disappointing to learn that we were both autodidacts. That was how lowly society regarded people who taught themselves swordcraft.

As I was reflecting on that, Shido suddenly reached a hand inside his coat. Grabbing one of the many survival knives lined inside his uniform, he threw it into the crowd without hesitation. It flew with incredible speed toward the man I’d just heard mock us.

“H-huh?!”

As luck would have it, the man had leaned over by coincidence, avoiding the knife. The entire blade lodged into the wall behind him; Shido had released it as hard as he could. If it had beamed the man in the head, he certainly would have died.

“Shit, I missed.”

Shido was legitimately peeved that his sudden act of murderous violence had missed. He hadn’t intended that throw as a threat; he’d actually meant to hit him.

*What’s with this guy?!*

As a panicked uproar rose from the crowd, Shido spoke calmly.

“You, over there... Were you laughing at me?”

He was glaring directly at the man who had mocked us. Shido must have had really sharp ears. His low, chill-inducing voice reverberated throughout the entire venue.

“N-n-no, of course not! I—I would never!” the man shrieked, shaking his head fervently as his teeth chattered from fear.

“I’ve burned your face into my memory. Best watch yourself on your way home tonight. Got it?”

“Eek?!?!”

The man fearfully sprinted from his seat, and the arena fell dead silent.

*So this is who I’m up against...*

He was as deadly as he looked.

*I don’t want to compliment him for what he just did, but that was an incredible throw...*

The stands were about ninety meters from the stage, and there was wind to account for as well. Despite that, the knife had passed through the exact point that he’d aimed for.

Shido had excellent hearing, superhuman vision, robust arm strength, and a competitive spirit—everything a person needed to be skilled with the blade, and at a high level no less. That one action

made all that clear as day.

*He's no ordinary swordsman...*

The oppressive aura I felt when he looked at me was far greater than what I felt from Lia and Rose.

The announcer raised his voice a little to try to move things along and liven the silent venue.

“W-well...that was an unfortunate incident, but let's get things back on track! The second match of the Elite Five Holy Festival is about to begin!”

We were finally getting started. While maintaining a healthy level of tension, my hand reached for the hilt of my blade.

“Are you both ready? On my mark—begin!”

I unsheathed my sword and assumed the usual middle stance as soon as we were given the signal.

Shido, on the other hand, drew his blade from his hip lazily, as if the very action annoyed him. He let his right arm hang limp and stood upright without assuming any stance.

*I've seen all kinds of forms from many different schools of swordcraft, but I've definitely never seen anything like this...*

Even for a self-taught swordsman, his stance was peculiar. He was holding his weapon straight down as if drunk. Calling it a “stance” was being generous.

*...Is he tempting me to attack? Or is he not taking me seriously?*

Feeling irritation simmer inside me, I took a deep breath to regain my composure.

*Chairwoman Reia was confident that Ferris had something up her sleeve. She must have picked Shido as her captain for a reason.*

There had to be something special to his stance that I didn't understand.

*It would be very risky to charge at him without knowing how he might counter...*

Most swordsmen in this situation would continue to stare each other down and enter a deadlock. I, however, had a useful move that could speed things along.

“First Style—Flying Shadow!”

Using a long-distance slash attack would allow me to see him in action without the need to approach him.

*All right, how will he deal with this...? Wait, what?*

The slash attack I sent at him suddenly disappeared.

“Huh?!”

I was astonished.

*Wh-what just happened...?!*

Shido didn't move an inch, but Flying Shadow somehow vanished. There wasn't a single thing about his behavior that suggested he'd

done anything special.

*Is he already using some kind of Soul Attire...?*

That would explain it. As I'd just witnessed with Hundred Hellblade, Soul Attire enabled extraordinary abilities. A type with the power to nullify long-distance attacks had to exist.

*Well, I'll try it again...*

Raising my sword above my head a second time, I brought it down with extra speed and strength.

*"First Style—Flying Shadow!"*

This time, a significantly sharper slash attack raced toward him.

*Okay, how is he going to defend against this?!*

I watched carefully so I wouldn't miss a single action—



—and saw him wave his limply held sword at lightning speed to knock the Flying Shadow aside. That was truly all he did.

*Y-you can't be serious?!*

I shuddered. His swing time greatly exceeded both Lia's and Rose's. He was so incredibly swift that I could only barely see his blade even if I concentrated.

I gulped, and he glared at me.

"Hey, I came here for a fight, not for some boring target practice... I'm gonna crush you like an ant," he spat, emanating terrible menace.

*He's coming...!*

I held my middle stance, giving myself a perfect guard. Yet, Shido was right under my nose before I knew it.

*H-he's fast!*

I quickly turned my sword horizontally to block his downward strike. Sparks flew when our weapons collided.

*How did he get so brawny?!*

While I held Shido back with both hands using all the strength I could muster, he looked like he was only barely exerting himself.

"Hmph, not a bad reaction... Hah!"

Suddenly, he spun around and kicked me hard in the stomach.

"Gah!"

His blow knocked all the wind out of my lungs and sent me rocketing backward.

*Shoot... How could a simple kick be that strong...?*

I fell gracefully and then quickly reassumed the middle stance, but Shido did not pursue. He just held his sword limp and let out a massive yawn. Clearly, he didn't perceive me as a threat.

I used this time to reflect on our last exchange.

*Shido's high-speed method of approach is entirely different from Rose's.*

Rose had a soft, flexible style of movement that matched her opponent's breathing and blinking. On the other hand, Shido utilized a brutish method of movement that relied solely on his ridiculous leg strength.

*I can't get over that downward slash.*

To put it bluntly, it was a crude attack. Shido's grip was amateurish, and he didn't keep his arms by his side. Instead, he simply swung his sword down at full strength, with very little in the way of skill.

*Now that I think about it, that goes for his kick, too...*

It was an erratic blow that drew solely from his powerful legs.

*Although it was astoundingly intense, that only made its rawness stand out more.*

If he'd dropped his center of gravity and put his body into the attack, I would have suffered a much greater injury.

In short, he was doing nothing more than relying on his latent

physical ability.

*Shido is a one-in-a-thousand natural.*

It hurt to admit, but I wasn't in his league. His limbs possessed supernatural vigor and springlike flexibility. All his traits were top-notch and far outstripped my own.

*But that doesn't mean I can't win...!*

He was clearly lacking in effort, training, and, above all, an earnest interest in swordcraft.

*That gives me a chance to come out on top!*

Shido brought me back to the present by clicking his tongue loudly.

"...Tch. Will you quit staring at me? You're creeping me out... It's obvious that talentless trash like you could never hope to defeat greatness like me. Why not quit this pointless charade and surrender now?" he proposed with a mocking smile.

"...There's no denying your natural gifts, Shido. You're on another plane compared to me. But I am going to win this match."

"...Huh?"

All at once, veins bulged on his forehead, and a menacing aura seemed to form around him.

"I see you have a death wish!"

Shido rushed at me with explosive speed, closing the distance between us in an instant.

"Take this!"

He swung his sword with nothing more than brute force. His grip was poor, and he didn't make use of his full body weight. But with might as overwhelming as his, even such clumsy technique could produce rapid, devastating assaults.

*...Eight-Span Crow would take too long to use.*

I had just the move for this situation.

"Cloudy Sky Style—Cirrocumulus Cloud!"

I loosed four slash attacks in the blink of an eye and repelled Shido's approaching chain of attacks. This technique had only moderate strength, but it was swiftest in my arsenal.

"You annoying piece of shit!"

Shido jumped high and descended with a downward slash using all his weight. His extraordinary arm strength alone was enough to deal with, so blocking this attack was going to be tricky.

Luckily, I had a skill I'd learned from one of my classmates that would help me here.

"Slice Iron Style—Demolish Iron!"

Our swords collided, and I held Shido back with all my strength. Unifying my body and blade to feel like a single mass of iron, I let the shock waves pass through me and into the ground. *Temper your body until iron itself becomes soft*—that was the essence of the Slice Iron



School of Swordcraft.

“DAMMIT!”

Shido cursed loudly and jumped back after I blocked his attacks, then sheathed his sword and rushed directly at me.

“YOU’RE DEAD!!!”

He accelerated and performed an incredibly fast draw strike.

I needed to meet speed with speed—Rose’s quickest move would be effective in this situation.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Lightning Sakura!”

An electric-fast slash collided with Shido’s draw strike. The speed of both moves was about equal— Actually, mine was a little faster.

“Whuh?! Will you stop changing your style?! You’re creeping me out!”

Shido jumped back to create distance between us after I blocked his attack again.

That marked the end of his turn. Now it was my time to strike.

I approached him for the first time this match.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Secret Technique—Mirror Sakura Slash!”

I sent four mirrored slashes down from both the left and the right.

“That soft crap won’t work on me!”

Shido made full use of his elite physical ability to deflect each of my cuts.

*...His reaction time and speed are truly out of this world.*

I was dumbfounded by his talent.

*But this is what I was waiting for!*

Blocking four attacks from opposite directions had left his center wide-open. Target in my sights, I unleashed eight simultaneous slash attacks.

“Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!”

“Graaaaah...?!”

Shido met the approaching gashes and knocked down one after another with astounding speed. However—

“Argh!”

—deflecting them all from his broken posture proved difficult, and one got through and bashed him in the head.

“...You bastard,” he spat, cradling his injured head and glaring at me with bloodshot eyes.

Meeting his gaze directly, I spoke my mind.

“You’re really strong, Shido. I can’t match your arm and leg muscles, your sword speed, or your reflexes. But when it comes to devoting myself to my art—to swordcraft—I have you beat!”

“Pfft...”

Shido opened his eyes wide, looked up at the sky, and began to cackle.

“Pfft, ha-ha-ha... Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

He sounded like a maniac.

“Oh...shut up, shutup shutup shutup shutup! You gross the *shit* out of me!” Shido cursed.

He pointed his sword at me.

“I loathe that look in your eyes... I can see you actually believe in all that ‘effort’ and ‘swordcraft’ bullshit... Give me a break!”

Shido ground his teeth and carelessly tossed his weapon aside.

“Once trash, always trash! You hear that? You’ll never change! No matter how much you swing your blade, no matter how much effort you put in, you’ll always be garbage! Wrap your puny brain around that!” he screamed.

Finished with his rant, Shido raised his hand into the air.

“I’ll show you how wretched your *effort* and *swordcraft* are in the face of my absolute talent.”

I suddenly sensed a massive amount of pressure. This was the third time I had experienced this feeling since facing Lia and Cain.

*I knew it. Shido can do it, too...*

I strengthened my guard and gripped my sword tightly.

With a wicked smile, Shido cried:

“Consume—Ice Wolf Vanargand!”

He pulled a sword out from a large rift in the air. The blade was as white as snow, the handle as black as night. It was Soul Attire.

“Ha-ha, you’re finished!” Shido spat.

“Bring it on!” I responded.

The real, decisive battle started now.



After Shido produced his Soul Attire, called Vanargand, I noticed something strange.

*...Has it gotten colder?*

It was currently daytime, and the sun was high in the sky, so it didn’t make sense for it to be so chilly outside. I strained my eyes and saw white mist coming off his sword.

*Is that cold air...?*

Though I tried to analyze the ability of his Soul Attire, I was quickly interrupted.

“You’re done... Freezing Spear!”

A two-meter-long spear made of ice suddenly materialized in midair.

*I was right... This Soul Attire can manipulate air temperature.*

Holding tight to my middle stance, I directed my attention to the tip of the weapon, which was pointing toward me.

“Let’s see how you dance!”

Shido waved his right hand, and the lance shot toward me with incredible speed. I met it by swinging my sword down diagonally.

“Hargh!”

A massive shock ran through my arms. The ice was easily harder than iron and boasted great density.

“Grrrraaaaahhhhhh!”

Somehow, I managed to deflect the ice spear upward, sending it flying.

I turned back toward Shido, but he was gone.

“Over here, dumbass.”

I heard his voice behind me.

“?! ”

“Take that!”

I made a snap decision to try to dodge by rolling forward, but I was too late.

“Urgh...”

Burning pain raced through me as his sword sliced into my back.

In response, I leaped up immediately and focused my vision on him.

*The wound isn’t deep, thank goodness. I can still fight...!*

I encouraged myself and looked up, only to see two more ice spears.

“Try and dodge this!”

I dashed right before he fired the spears.

*I have to keep moving!*

Incapable of destroying those ice spears with my strength alone, my next best option was to keep moving so that they couldn’t hit me. I dashed around quickly to throw off Shido’s aim.

“Will you stop running?!”

He approached me with one step and unleashed four incredibly quick slash attacks.

“Cl-Cloudy Sky Style—Cirrocumulus Cloud!”

I deployed my swiftest technique, attempting to defend myself.

“Gah!”

I failed to deflect the final slash, resulting in a powerful blow to my left shoulder. Fortunately, it felt like it didn’t reach bone, so I managed to keep both hands gripped on my blade.

*Geez, he’s even faster than before!*

Shido was wielding his sword at blistering speeds, perhaps due to the power of Vanargand. As he pressed me with attack after attack, my number of wounds steadily increased.

“Haaah, haaah...dammit...”

The match seemed hopeless, but I couldn’t give up.

“ALLEN! YOU HAVE TO WIN!”

“DON’T GIVE UP!”

“KEEP MOVING! WEAR HIM OUT!”

Every spectator from Thousand Blade Academy had been shouting for me at the top of their lungs from the beginning of the match.

*I have to win, for them!*

But I hadn't yet found anything I could take advantage of to defeat Shido.

*Vanargand is a truly terrifying Soul Attire...*

It could manipulate cold air freely and create absurdly hard ice spears. As an added bonus, it increased the user's physical capabilities.

*It's not a fair fight...*

I grit my teeth in frustration.

“You're not thinking that I've gotten *faster*, are you?” Shido asked.

It was as if he had been reading my thoughts.

“Well, I hate to break it to you, but you have it backward,” he continued, shaking his head and snickering.

“...What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Ha, you really haven't noticed...? It's actually you who's getting *slower*.”

Shido pointed at my hands, and I looked down.

“Wh-what the...?!”

My arms had turned a light shade of purple.

“I take it you're familiar with hypothermia?” he asked with a mocking smile. He lifted Vanargand, still releasing cold air, to show what he'd done.

*Dammit, he got me...*

I'd been so distracted by the ice spears that I hadn't noticed what was happening to my body.

*It doesn't look like Shido is shivering from the cold at all...*

I guess the blade's wielder didn't suffer the effects of the frigid air.

*This is bad...*

The longer this match continued, the lower my body temperature would drop, and the worse my chances of winning would become.

*My disadvantage is only going to grow...*

I needed to find a way to end this while I still had control of my body.

Suddenly between a rock and a hard place, I charged at Shido.

“Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!”

I only managed six slashes with the skill as opposed to the usual eight.

“Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha! What's wrong?! You realize you're two short, right?!” he laughed as he easily deflected the six slashes.

“Crap...”

With my abilities decreased to this extent, I had no chance of winning in a straight fight.

*That means I just need to hit him with a surprise attack!*

I spent about five minutes preparing Hazy Moon strikes in multiple places throughout the stage, continuing to fend Shido off all the while.

“Haaah...haaah...”

“What’s the matter? Already at your limit?”

My opponent sauntered toward me while calmly holding his sword against his shoulder, assured of his triumph.

*Everything’s ready to go. My placement is perfect, too...!*

If he merely continued down his current route, the Hazy Moons would tear him apart.

*No matter how fast his reflexes are, he won’t be able to dodge attacks he can’t see!*

I maintained my middle stance and watched. Suddenly, Shido jerked to a halt.

“Whoa there, what’s this? Did you think I wouldn’t see this trap?”

He flourished his blade through the space in front of him, and the Hazy Moon strikes I had worked so hard to set activated to the movement, fruitlessly slicing the air.

“Only a second-rate amateur would use such obvious traps!” he snickered before charging and closing the distance in an instant.

“Huh?!”

I kicked off the ground and tried to jump backward, but I lost my balance.

“Crap!”

My left leg had given out. The frostbite must have spread.

“Take this!”

Not letting his opportunity go to waste, Shido delivered a fierce front kick to my abdomen.

“Gah!”

I heard the grotesque *crack* of bones breaking and curled up on the ground like a ball.

A fit of coughing overtook me. My abdomen was bleeding; my shattered bones might have punctured my intestines.

“Come on, that’s disgusting... You’re gonna get my shoes dirty!”

Shido howled with laughter as he mercilessly ground my face with his foot.

“Y-you’re going completely off the rails!”

“Don’t push your luck...!”

Lia and Rose glared at Shido with bloodlust in their eyes. After flashing an indescribable expression, he scratched his cheek in apparent embarrassment.

“Ah...sorry about that. Guess there’s no point in making you suffer. I’ll just kill you instead,” he leered, thrusting Vanargand to my throat.

““Huh?!”” I heard Lia and Rose gasp.

Doing anything that could kill your opponent was against the rules of the Elite Five Holy Festival, but...I doubted Shido cared about that. This guy was going to splatter me all over the stage.

"H-he's joking, right?!" shouted Lia.

"R-Referee! Stop him now!" yelled Rose.

"M-Mr. Shido, please stop!" pleaded the referee.

Lia and Rose both went pale, and the referee jumped onto the stage in a panic.

However, there was no way he would reach us in time.

*Shit... Is this where I die?*

My frostbite had become so severe that I could barely move. Though, given Shido's foot on my stomach, moving would have been impossible regardless.

"Ha-ha! It's not every day you get these chances. I'm gonna turn your corpse into a hilarious work of art!"

Shido guffawed simplemindedly and lifted his sword.

"Vanar Thrust!"

Vanargand released a massive gust of glacial air, and Shido launched it toward my throat with explosive force. If that attack landed, I would be finished.

*So this is it...*

I'd swung my blade for hours on end, day after day. I'd trained harder than anyone. No one dedicated as much attention to their swordcraft as me; the billion years I'd spent sharpening my skills was proof of that.

But ultimately, none of that mattered. I still hadn't been good enough. I would be laid to waste in the face of absolute talent.

*Lia, Rose, Chairwoman Reia, Ms. Paula, Mom...I'm sorry.*

This seemed like the end for me. My sword had been knocked away, and I couldn't even lift a finger.

*But I won't let him break my spirit.*

I opened my eyes wide to stare down the oncoming thrust. Closing them was out of the question. I was going to cling to life until I heaved my last breath.

In contrast to my immobile body, my heart was a whirlwind of jumbled emotions.

*I really, really don't want to die. I don't want to lose. I want to beat this prodigy!!!*

At that moment, I heard something deep inside my mind—something that felt like a *soul*—whisper to me.

*I see you're still as shit as you ever were, Allen.*

My consciousness faded to black.



Shido's Vanar Thrust raced toward Allen's neck.

"A-Allen...!"

"No! Dodge it!"

Lia and Rose both went pale, and many spectators covered their eyes. Then something unexpected happened.

"...Huh?" Shido exclaimed angrily.

Allen had caught Shido's thrust with his right hand.

"Tch, this some kind of adrenaline rush...?" Shido wondered aloud.

All of a sudden, Allen picked up Vanargand, and Shido along with it, and tossed them aside with ease.

"What the...?!"

Though bewildered by the sudden turnabout, Shido quickly regained his composure and landed gracefully.

The cold air of Vanargand parted to reveal Allen idly standing. Not only were the innumerable wounds he'd received throughout the duel nowhere to be found, but his appearance had also changed drastically.

His hair had grown long and turned bone white. A black pattern had formed under his left eye, which had turned a brilliant shade of crimson along with his right. But his looks weren't the only thing that had transformed—nothing about the ferocious expression lining his face resembled Allen in the slightest.

In fact, his astounding metamorphosis made it seem as if he had become a different person entirely.

Allen surveyed his surroundings and smiled wickedly.

"Oh, long time no see! It's been hundreds of millions—no, billions of years! What a turn this has taken, huh?"

He chortled heartily to himself. Meanwhile, everyone in the venue stared in stupefied shock.

"...So he decided to *show himself* after all," muttered Reia. She alone regarded this with an insightful glare.

After laughing for a long while, he began to mutter to himself.

"I can't believe you haven't so much as touched a bit of this *incredible power* you have... You truly are hopeless, Allen."

Those words were clearly directed toward his former self.

As an uproar rose from the stands, Shido questioned him with an incisive look.

"You're shitting me... Are you a Spirit Core...?"

Many believed that a Spirit Core occupied every human soul. There were many varieties of cores, including ancestral spirits, cryptids, and lost souls. A Spirit Core supposedly encompassed a person's entire essence, whereas Soul Attire was equipment that embodied only a piece of the human soul.

"Me? I'm..."

Allen started to answer, but then he silently shook his head.

“Actually, what am I doing answering someone who’s about to croak?”

He had no qualms about openly announcing his intention to kill his opponent.

“Who the hell do you think you’re talking to?! I’m sick to death of your ugly ass! Freezing Spear!”

Shido fired a much larger projectile than the ones he’d created before, its size indicating just how seriously he was taking this version of Allen.

“Allen, dodge it!”

“Run!”

Lia and Rose screamed out for Allen to avoid the lance. Allen, however, remained unfazed as Shido’s hopeless attack narrowed in.

“Ha, how pathetic.”

He sent the spear crumbling with a casual flick of his left hand, as if it were as brittle as candy.

“Wh-what the hell...?!”

Shido couldn’t believe his eyes. That javelin hadn’t been made out of ordinary ice; it had been specially constructed through Soul Attire to be tougher than iron. And Allen had smashed it to pieces effortlessly—the absurdity had Shido at a loss for words.

“Pfft... Gwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Don’t look so astounded! Did you really think you could hurt me by playing with ice?” the transformed Allen taunted.

A tiny red speck in the corner of Allen’s vision caught his attention.

“...Huh?”

Wondering what it was, he looked down and saw that the back of his left hand—which he had just used to deflect the bayonet of ice—was bleeding ever so slightly. The sight incensed him.

“You goddamn geezer! Why the hell did you give me such a weak body?! How dare you slack on me!” Allen yelled furiously.

He fixed his gaze on an old man in the stands who had been watching the Holy Festival since the beginning of the first match. The hair on his head, his eyebrows, and his beard were all snow white, and his back was clearly crooked.

“Hyo-hoh?! H-he didn’t see me, he didn’t see me...!” the old man pleaded to himself before going transparent and disappearing.

“Tch, what a fucking coward. That old fogey hasn’t changed at all... I’ll make him pay the next time I find him.”

As this transpired, Shido noticed Allen’s undefended back and snickered.

“I’ll teach you not to let your guard down around the likes of me! Vanar Thrust!” Shido screamed.

Concocting an eruption of freezing air, he drove his sword forward



with enormous propulsive force.



“Whoa there, don’t get the wrong idea. It’s not that I’ve let my guard down; I simply have no need to protect myself when my opponent isn’t a threat in the slightest.”

Allen caught Shido’s blade between his thumb and index finger as if he were simply picking a grain of rice off his clothes.

“Y-you’re shitting me...,” Shido said with a gasp.

“Huh? Don’t tell me that was your strongest technique...,” jeered Allen.

Shido stared in silent disbelief at the monster in front of him.

*I—I can’t win...*

This was the first time in his fifteen years of life that he felt fear.

“No way, was it actually? ...You’re so pathetic, I don’t know what to say.”

Allen choked down a laugh and shook his head exaggeratedly.

“It’s just my luck to emerge to the surface and have to face a pipsqueak as my first opponent... But whatever, you’ll at least help me break in this new body a little. Try not to die too easily, okay?”

“...?!”

What happened next could not even be called a “fight” by any stretch of the imagination.

Allen mercilessly pummeled Shido in a manner so one-sided, Shido might as well have been a sandbag. From upper and lower body strength to reaction time, every one of Allen’s attributes was on another level. Shido’s natural gifts, which had always allowed him to dominate his competition, were nothing against Allen’s overwhelming physical prowess.

“Haaah... Haaah...”

Shido staggered back up, panting and covered in bruises and lacerations. He had used his superhuman reflexes to prevent blows to his vital points.

“Very nice! Your reflexes deserve praise, if nothing else!” taunted Allen.

“Tch... Don’t fuck with me...,” Shido said with a gasp.

Spitting saliva mixed with blood, he continued to run so that Allen wouldn’t be able to hit him. Though he knew at this point that he was no match for Allen, hope still shone in his eyes.

*If this ridiculous strength is from his Spirit Core, it can’t last forever. All I need is for this monster to revert back to the old Allen, and victory will be in my grasp!*

Shido latched onto the small possibility that a war of attrition could give him a chance of victory, waiting for the *thing* that was controlling Allen’s body to exhaust itself. However, the chance to pull this off never came.

“I’m bored of this...” Allen sighed.

Just then, a huge rift appeared in the sky, from which an ebon sword emerged. Both its blade and aura were black, and it projected a nauseating aura of evil.

*What the hell is that...? That can't be real...*

Shido's natural instincts were screaming for him to run. That was how impossibly threatening the power within the black sword was.

*...The great Shido, run? From this trash? As if!*

His pride was too great to allow him to flee. Turning his back on a swordsman he had once considered inferior would be worse than death.

"Nice knowin' you," Allen remarked casually, unleashing an explosively fast thrust.

Realizing this attack would blow his body to bits, Shido deployed his greatest defensive technique.

"Close off eternity, Frozen Waterfall!"

An enormous wall of ice erupted before Shido. The barrier was made of one hundred million layers of thin ice packed together, creating an impenetrable defense. Each individual layer boasted the hardness of steel; there wasn't a swordsman alive capable of breaking through it.

Yet it did nothing to stop Allen's thrust. The ebon blade sliced through the layers of the ice wall as if they were made of paper.

"...Close off time once more, Frozen Waterfall!"

In a desperate, last-ditch measure, Shido erected another defensive barricade with one hundred million layers of ice. Though the effort was extremely taxing on his stamina, if he didn't stop this attack, he would die. That he was sure of.

Allen's attack penetrated the first one hundred million layers and then tens of millions of layers of the next wall before finally being brought to a halt.

*...Shit! How could a simple thrust be that powerful?!*

Shido breathed a sigh of relief that his wall had held.

"Three..."

He heard a deadpan voice. A moment later, the remaining thousands of layers of ice began to shatter noisily. Allen was gradually channeling more and more strength into his strike.

"Two..."

The sound of the ice breaking grew louder each second.

"One..."

The referee realized the meaning of the countdown and jumped onto the stage.

"St-stop—stop right there!"

He tried to suspend the match, but Allen was too far gone.

"Zero...!"

His thrust penetrated through the last of the two hundred million layers of ice and flew directly for Shido's heart.

"?!"

Shido used his godlike reflexes to contort his body, narrowly avoiding a direct blow to his heart. Instead, the black sword penetrated deep into his right shoulder, and the shock waves from the assault blew a hole through the wall of the venue.

"GAAAAAAAAAH!"

All the air was shot out of Shido's lungs, and a strong blow to the back of his head knocked him unconscious. Elated from the thrill of his first battle in ages, Allen approached his fallen opponent. He was holding a second black sword.

"Time to finish this!"

He laughed like an innocent child before the totally still Shido, then lifted his blade without hesitation.

"Allen, stop!"

Lia forced her way between the two of them.

"...Huh?"

"You're going too far... This isn't you, Allen!"

"...Who the hell are you?"

Allen's frigid gaze pierced her heart, but she didn't falter.

"I am Lia Vesteria, princess of Vesteria! Did you really forget me? I'm your slave, Lia Vesteria!"

"Huh? Never heard of you. Stand in my way, and I'll strike you down, too."

Allen pointed his black sword at Lia with cold, emotionless eyes.

"...A-Allen? Do you really mean that...?"

Her hoarse voice reverberated throughout the venue. The only place it failed to reach was Allen's heart. Despite that, she continued to plead with him, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. She wasn't addressing the Allen in front of her, but the kind Allen she knew.

"Y-you have to remember! We ate ramzac together! We talked for hours and hours! We even fought sometimes! But it was always fun!" she yelled. Tears spilled from her eyes as if the memories had caused a dam to burst.

"Tch, shut up, girl... I don't care what you have to say. Die!"

Allen raised his ebon blade high and swung it down toward Lia's chest.

"Please, Allen...go back to the kind boy I know!"

Suddenly, his arm stopped midswing, and his weapon dropped from his hand.

"You damn brat..."

Face twisted in anguish, Allen clutched his chest and fell to a knee.

"I-if you have willpower great enough to wrest control back from

me...you should have shown it from the damn start...,” he wheezed before going limp.

The young man’s long white hair returned to its normal black color, and the black pattern below his left eye disappeared.

“A-Allen...?! Are you okay?!”

Lia rushed over to Allen and laid him down in her lap. His breathing was shallow.

“L-Lia...sorry for...scaring you...”

Only half-conscious, he reached his hand for her cheek.

“I-it’s okay... I believed in you.”

She gently clasped his hand and didn’t let go.

“I heard...your voice... Thank you...”

Those were the last words he managed before losing consciousness entirely.

“...Allen? Hey, Allen! Answer me, Allen!”



It was about noon, two days after the disturbance at the Holy Festival. An emergency meeting among the chairs of the Elite Five Academies was being held at the EFA Assembly Hall in the middle of Aurst, the capital of the Liengard Empire.

The city had imposed tight security to accommodate the gathering of the five heads of the academies. An enormous number of holy knights were stationed around the building for defense and to direct traffic. Not even a mouse was going to squeeze through.

Everyone gathered in the VIP room was a person of great influence in the country. Chairwoman Reia Lasnote of Thousand Blade Academy was there, as well as Chairwoman Ferris Dorhein of Ice King Academy. The three other chairmen were present as well, along with other eminent faces.

They had assembled to discuss the second match of the Elite Five Holy Festival, the one between Allen Rodol and Shido Jukurius. There were two clear violations of the rules that they needed to decide on punishment for. An elderly gentleman from the government with no connection whatsoever to the Elite Five Academies had been placed in charge of proceedings.

He announced the result of the first vote with an elegant, well-projected voice.

“Five votes in favor, and zero votes against. Shido Jukurius will face a one-month suspension from Ice King Academy.”

“““““No objection,””””” the five chairs said together.

Reia and the other four were all on the same page in regard to Shido. He’d ignored the referee’s command to stop and had unleashed

a deadly attack on his opponent. Since Allen had blocked the attack, it wouldn't result in any major consequences, but Shido had clearly violated the rules and would need to be held accountable.

After deciding Shido's fate, they turned to the most important topic of the day.

"Next, we will consider the consequences for Thousand Blade Academy's Allen Rodol. You will first vote to decide whether or not he should receive the heaviest possible punishment of expulsion. You have thirty minutes to discuss this matter at length. Use it wisely."

The chairs began voicing their opinions once the government representative finished speaking.

"What need is there to even discuss this? He clearly should be expelled!"

"I agree. I've half a mind we hand him over to the holy knights for an attempted homicide."

"U-um... I think that expulsion is unavoidable...I suppose."

"Considering what he did to my Shido...expulsion is the only option."

After the other four endorsed Allen's ejection from the academy, Reia alone voiced her objection.

"Hold on! Allen wasn't in his right mind at the time! I don't think he can be held responsible for his actions!"

It was one against four. Though Reia was at a clear disadvantage, she still pleaded her case.

"Even if he wasn't in control of his actions, doesn't that just show his own lack of skill?"

"I agree. Students of the Elite Five Academies must remain disciplined at all times. Losing control of oneself in the middle of a match is unacceptable."

"U-um... Losing control of yourself sounds bad...I guess."

"Hmm... Going off the video footage, he was clearly able to communicate. It didn't look like he was suffering to me, dear Reia."

"..."

Reia was at a loss for words after such a harsh rebuke.

*Grrr...*

She bit her lower lip and tried to formulate a brilliant idea that would turn the tables of the debate.

*...I can't do it.*

No matter how hard she thought, she couldn't come up with any idea at all, let alone a good one.

Brainwork had never been her strong suit, and she also lacked a silver tongue. Convincing the chairs, all of whom were experts in the art of debate, was objectively difficult. Abundantly aware of her shortcomings, she quickly abandoned the notion of convincing them

with words and settled for the most basic and primitive method she knew.

“If Allen gets expelled, each and every one of you will have to deal with me... Are you okay with that?” Reia threatened. The others gulped.

Although her method was crude and childish, not to mention hardly much of a plan, it was truly her most effective option. There wasn’t a person in the room ignorant of the deeds of “Black Fist” Reia Lasnote.

“Whuh...?!”

“Nrgh...”

“E-eek...”

“That’s frightening...”

Logically, this was nothing more than a threat. There was no way someone would make an enemy of the Elite Five Academies to protect one student. The risk was far greater than the reward.

However, not a single one of the chairs would have put it past Reia. The moment she threatened them, an infamous incident from her past flashed before their eyes.

At that time, Reia was still a student. It started when a midsize criminal organization called Crimson Rain seriously injured a close friend of hers. Reia flew into a rage upon hearing the news and invaded their headquarters alone after forcing her way through everyone who tried to talk her out of it. By the end of the night, the Crimson Rain, which had dogged the holy knights for so many years, had been completely wiped out. That was the most famous example of Reia’s fighting prowess.

The other chairs fell silent just as the timer rang. Now that the allotted time had passed, the old man managing the meeting cleared his throat.

“I will now conduct the vote for whether or not Thousand Blade Academy’s Allen Rodol will be expelled. Starting with Ms. Lasnote and going left, please say *aye* if you are in favor, or *nay* if you are opposed.”

The vote that would decide Allen’s fate had begun.

“A hard nay, of course!” Reia declared emphatically. The vote moved to the chairwoman on her left.

“U-um... Well, I...”

The chair was a weak-willed lady who almost always took a neutral position, so she was evidently wavering between both sides. Sensing that, Reia loudly cracked the knuckles on her right hand.

“Eeeeek! N-n-n-nay!”

Despite declaring herself in favor of the expulsion earlier, she folded at Reia’s threat. The other chairs in favor of expulsion stared daggers her way, cursing her for betraying their cause.



“Aye! He obviously deserves expulsion!”

“I concur. I vote *aye* as well.”

The next two chairmen were itching to expel Allen, so they voted in favor as quickly as they could.

The vote was now two in favor and two against. With opinion divided evenly, the deciding vote belonged to Chairwoman Ferris Dorhein of Ice King Academy. Not only was her institution the victim in this case, but Ferris and Reia had also fought like cats and dogs since their academy days.

*Shoot, guess this is it...*, seethed Reia.

*Ha-ha, we've got this!*

*This is a guaranteed victory!*

The two elderly male chairmen, who had voted in favor, celebrated internally.

“Hmm, I vote *nay*. Isn't expulsion a little harsh?” Ferris smirked, voting opposite of what everyone expected her to.

“““““Huh?!””””” the other four chairs exclaimed at once.

The old man quickly announced the results of the vote.

“Two in favor and three against—as the opposition received more votes, Allen Rodol will remain enrolled.”

The chairmen, who had been gunning for an ousting, pounded the desk in fury.

“Wh-what the hell?!”

“What is this farce?!”

Their faces red with rage, they glared at the turncoats who had foiled their plans at the last moment.

“What are you two thinking?!”

“This isn't how things were supposed to go!”

Prior to the meeting, they had approached the other two chairwomen to secure their votes for Allen's expulsion. They had even sweetened the deal with a massive bribe.

“U-um... I-I'm so sorry!” apologized the old woman who had cracked under Reia's threat, prostrating herself on the desk with tears in her eyes.

On the other hand, Ferris didn't show any signs of guilt as she spoke coolly in return.

“I *heard* what you had to say...but I don't recall ever agreeing to anything.” She snickered, her foxlike eyes narrowed.

“Y-you treacherous wench... You got my ‘sweets,’ didn't you?!”

*Sweets* was a code word for the bribe Ferris had received. She'd indeed taken the “sweets,” but her reply had only been a simple expression of thanks.

“Grrr... What the hell are you playing at, you vixen?!”

“I actually was initially going to vote for expulsion, but...my

Shido...”

She launched into an explanation of the reason why she had voted against Allen’s expulsion.

“This morning, when I told him in his hospital room that I was leaving to go expel Allen, he said, ‘Madam, please don’t expel him. I’m gonna slaughter him in the next tournament.’ My prideful boy even bowed his head and pleaded with me,” she recalled with a weak grin. “The sight was so adorable that it just melted my heart! I decided I had to grant his request.”

Shido was an orphan who had been born in the slums. Chance led to Ferris adopting him when he was five years old. He ended up growing into a troublemaker due to her hands-off approach to parenting, but Ferris loved him as if he were her biological son, and Shido felt a strong sense of gratitude toward her in turn. He lovingly referred to her as *Madam*.

Between a plea from her beloved child and some elderly chairmen, it wasn’t much of a contest.

“Y-you fools!”

“Can you not see the consequences of this?! This will hurt all of us!”

The two old men had fought so hard for Allen’s expulsion because they feared the power he’d displayed in the video footage. He’d utterly dominated the match; Shido’s Soul Attire, Vanargand, couldn’t even touch him.

That ebon blade undoubtedly housed tremendous strength. It had rent through the impenetrable defense of Frozen Waterfall as if it were nothing. Most terrifyingly of all, Allen had even produced a second one.

*Dammit! This could give Thousand Blade Academy new life...*, thought one chairman.

*I worked so hard to finally rise to this position, and now I’m going to get hounded out of office...*, thought the other.

They’d wanted nothing more than to expel Allen to protect their own job security. The chair of one of the Elite Five Academies was a very attractive position. Given the massive societal power and influence of the academies, none were willing to oppose whoever held the position. Many aimed for the job as a result.

If even the smallest chink opened in a chair’s armor—if they performed poorly in tournaments like the Elite Five Holy Festival, for example—there was a chance they could be dismissed. The chairman of Thousand Blade Academy had been pushed out of office just the previous year.

It wasn’t that these two chairmen didn’t have confidence in the students they were training, or that they didn’t think their students could defeat *that version* of Allen. It was just best to nip problems in

the bud before they became issues down the line. The rise of Thousand Blade Academy could lead to the fall of their own institutions. Allen represented an unknown threat, which was why they wanted to get rid of him.

As the two elderly male chairmen shook with rage, Reia heaved a sigh of relief.

*Phew, I avoided the worst.*

Now that a decision had been reached regarding Allen's potential expulsion, the elderly gentleman from the government moved things along.

"Next, I will open the field to suggestions for the particulars of Allen Rodol's punishment. You have thirty minutes for discussion—use it wisely."

Expulsion was off the table, but Allen had still broken the rules of the Holy Festival. Like Shido, he needed to be disciplined.

Reia fought during the discussion to lighten Allen's consequences. In contrast, the two elderly chairmen pushed for a harsher ruling. The timid chairwoman vacillated between stances and tried to remain neutral. Ferris amused herself by doing her best to cause chaos. The debate between the five chairs was as grand as could be.



*Beep, beep, beep.*

I woke to the systematic beeping of a machine.

*Hmm...*

The pungent smell of disinfectant hit my nostrils. I saw dazzling, artificial light, and a wide white ceiling above me.

Someone had laid me down in a bed.

"Urgh... Where am I?"

When I twisted my neck to look around, I saw Lia and Rose. They were both sleeping in chairs while leaning against my bed.

The sight of my friends caused me to relax a little. I lifted my upper body slowly so as to not wake them and leaned on the headboard.

"I'm in the hospital..."

Electrodes were attached to my chest, and an ECG machine was set next to my bed. The beeping I heard was the sound of the machine displaying my pulse with a rising and falling horizontal line.

"Oh yeah, I wonder what happened back there..."

I didn't remember much of the events after Shido put his sword to my throat. All I could recall was that some *presence* that lay dormant inside me had been rampaging joyfully.

During that time, I had been submerged in deep, dark waters. I'd felt extremely drowsy but had somehow sensed it was essential that I

remained awake. I'd fought with all I had to stave off sleep, nodding off all the while, until I'd heard Lia's voice. I'd turned toward the sound—and suddenly, I'd been pointing my sword at her. After that, I'd struggled desperately to regain control.

I'd thrashed around in the heavy water, and before I knew it, I'd returned to the real world.

*What the heck was that thing...?* I wondered, trying to remember what had happened.

"Ngh..."

Lia slowly sat up and rubbed her eyes. She was awake.

"Good morning, Lia," I said.

"Oh, Allen! You're awake!" she exclaimed excitedly, pulling me in for a tight hug.

"I...can't breathe..."

"Thank goodness... Oh, thank goodness..." she muttered repeatedly, her voice quivering.

*I really worried her...*

I simultaneously felt guilty for causing her worry and happy that she cared about me this much. But there was one thing I desperately needed to make clear.

"L-Lia, they're, uh... They're in my face..."

"What is? ...Huh?!"

Quickly realizing what I was referring to, she jumped back from me, red-faced. She crossed her arms and glared at me.

"You're such a pervert, Allen!" she yelled.

"S-surely I don't deserve that..." I mumbled with an embarrassed smile.

"Ngh... Allen?"

Rose woke up, rubbed her eyes, and stretched in her chair.

Being the poor morning person that she was, she didn't have a shred of her usual dignity. I couldn't avoid taking my eyes off the cowlicks on top of her head. Her bedhead was a work of art.

"Good morning, Rose."

"...Morning... Are you okay?" she asked drowsily.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Despite the deep wound I'd suffered, my body was so light that it almost felt as if I were floating. I looked at my arms and legs and noticed that I didn't have a single scratch. I had made a complete recovery.

*Is this due to his power?*

Some kind of *presence* had hijacked my body and used his power to wreak havoc.

*Who in the world was he?*

As I was considering that with a hand on my chest, the door to the

hospital room suddenly opened.

“Oh, you’re awake, Allen.”

It was Chairwoman Reia in her usual black suit.

“You’re looking healthy already. Awesome. I brought you a get-well gift! You can eat them when you build up an appetite,” she announced, passing me a plastic bag.

I glanced inside and saw three bunches of bananas.

*I—I have heard these are good for your health...*

I didn’t know what to do with this many bananas...but it’s the thought that counts with presents. I decided to graciously accept her gift.

“Thank you for taking the time to do that. I’ll enjoy them later,” I said.

She gave me a thumbs-up and grinned.

“Forget that, Reia! What’s going to happen to Allen?” asked Lia.

“Oh yeah, please tell us!” demanded Rose.

Lia and Rose both leaped out of their seats to surround the chairwoman.

“...?”

I had no idea what they were so worked up about. Apparently, I’d missed something important.

“Hey, calm down. We need to explain everything to Allen first,” the chairwoman insisted. She then filled me in on what had happened at the Holy Festival.

After the final match had ended, Shido and I had been transported to the hospital, unconscious. We had both suffered grievous wounds, but our bodies had recovered remarkably quickly, and we’d escaped mortal danger.

Both Thousand Blade Academy and Ice King Academy were disqualified for one of their team members using lethal attacks on an opponent. A meeting between the chairs was held today to determine our repercussions.

“So what’s Allen’s punishment?!”

“Just tell us already!”

Lia and Rose pressed Chairwoman Reia for an answer. She cleared her throat.

“Allen will be suspended for one month.”

“...Suspended? Not expelled?!”

“Are you sure about that?!”

They were both taken aback by the surprisingly light sentence.

“That’s right. I managed to keep it down to a suspension...though honestly, it was a lot closer than I would’ve liked.”

““Thank goodness...”” Lia and Rose sighed together. They looked as relieved as if they had been the ones in danger of being expelled.

“I do have some bad news, though... You two have also been suspended for one month as well to take collective responsibility for Allen’s actions.”

“H-how does that make any sense?!” I protested.

Neither of them had anything to do with that match. They hadn’t taken the stage to fight even once during the Holy Festival. The punishment was totally unjust.

“Eh, it’s fine. I don’t mind,” said Lia.

“We entered the Holy Festival as a team. I have no objection,” agreed Rose.

I was still against it.

“Why are Lia and Rose being suspended, too?! Tell me the reason!” I demanded.

The chairwoman scratched her cheek.

“As I said, they’re being punished for collective responsibility. They were unable to stop your outburst despite being members of the Thousand Blade Academy team. That’s the official line of reasoning anyway.”

She continued on with a troubled expression.

“But I’m sure the real reason was to hurt our chances of winning future tournaments. Next month, all the Elite Five Academies, Thousand Blade included, will be conducting the most important class of your high school tenure, Soul Attire Acquisition. The other chairs want to ruin your training in that area entirely. Lia and Rose will be our most important swordswomen for the foreseeable future, so they probably seek to thwart their development. Those sly devils,” Reia explained with a shrug.

“Lia, Rose...I’m sorry,” I said, apologizing for causing them trouble.

“Y-you don’t need to worry about it! You’ve recovered, and you weren’t expelled! This is cause for celebration!”

“Lia’s right. Don’t worry about us.”

I noticed that the chairwoman looked as if something was bothering her.

“...Honestly, all the blame should be directed toward me, not Allen. If I was just a little more skilled at debating, I would’ve been able to prevent Lia and Rose’s suspensions.”

She clenched her fists tightly.

“But if I can allow myself one excuse, those two pigheaded geezers were relentless! They attacked me at every single slip of the tongue. In the end, things nearly came to blows, and they took full control of the debate. Embarrassingly enough, I lost myself and can’t remember a word of what I said. All I recall is swearing to myself that one day, I would dent the faces of those two old men until they resembled potatoes...,” she confessed.

“Sounds like we weren’t suspended because of collective responsibility *or* because of Allen...,” muttered Lia.

“Yeah, this all happened because you got completely trounced in the debate. Then you tried to pin your failure on Allen by calling it ‘collective responsibility,’” accused Rose.

They both glared coldly at the chairwoman.

“Ha, ha-ha... What can I say...? S-sorry.”

Her eyes darted around before she clasped her hands together in apology.

The conversation reached a momentary pause. Something was bugging Lia.

“Do we have to spend the entire one-month suspension in our dorms?” she asked.

“We would end up really out of shape...,” added Rose.

Shutting ourselves away in our dorms for an entire month couldn’t be good for our bodies.

“Don’t worry your little heads about that. I had Eighteen think up a brilliant idea for that very issue,” announced the chairwoman.

“Y-you didn’t think of it yourself...,” I chided.

“Ha, of course not. I’m terrible at using my brain!” she exclaimed shamelessly. “Anyway, here’s the plan: You three will be working as spellblades for the next month.”

“Spellblades...?” I asked.

Spellblades were people who made a living by taking jobs from citizens and merchants in exchange for rewards.

In times past, people looked down on the occupation for “defiling the sanctity of swordcraft by using it for profit.” However, changing circumstances in recent years had caused that connotation to all but disappear. Reportedly, about 30 percent of graduates from high school swordcraft academies went on to enter that line of work.

“Yes, spellblades. There will be no money made from this, though—you’ll be taking every job without compensation. I suppose that’ll make you volunteers. Feel free to choose tasks such as beast exterminations, guard duty for important figures, or anything else that could require you to fight. You three shouldn’t end up in any real danger given your strength, and this practical combat experience will prove very valuable.”

“I see...”

Spending our days working as spellblades would prevent us from growing rusty.

“But wouldn’t traveling around and openly working as spellblades cause any problems? We’re supposed to be suspended,” I asked.

“That won’t be an issue. I’ll set this up as compulsory volunteer duty. Officially, this will be the Thousand Blade Academy chairwoman

penalizing her students. If anyone objects, they will receive strict discipline from the holy knights under the government's jurisdiction for interfering with a chair's authority. What a plan! Eighteen is a true genius. I'm so glad that I scooped him up!"

Chairwoman Reia nodded with satisfaction.

*She really works Eighteen to the bone... He's probably toiling away as we speak.*

His crime definitely deserved punishment, but I couldn't help but feel a little bad for him.

"I've actually always had a little interest in spellblades," remarked Lia.

"We'll be able to get some real combat experience. Sounds good to me," said Rose.

We all seemed to be feeling pretty good about this. The chairwoman cleared her throat.

"Your work as spellblades will take you outside the academy. Make sure you watch out for the Black Organization," she warned.

The Black Organization was a large-scale criminal group that had been causing a stir in this country in recent years. It took part in a great variety of illegal rackets, including manufacturing and smuggling drugs, human trafficking, and assassinating major figures. The holy knights had staked their pride on trying to wipe them out, but their progress had been miserable. They hadn't found even a sliver of information about the organization's leader, its base, or its aims.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Definitely don't want anything to do with them..."

"Understood."

After we all took her warning to heart, the chairwoman clapped her hands together.

"All right, I want you three to start your spellblade lives as soon as Allen fully recovers. Are there any objections?"

"No, ma'am," I responded.

"Nope!" answered Lia.

"Spellblade... This is kind of nostalgic," uttered Rose.

And thus, my new life as a spellblade was about to begin.



To the east of the Liengard Empire's capital of Aurest, there was a large district called Drestia. Referred to as the "Merchant's Town" on account of the many wealthy dealers who resided there, the streets were lined with stalls featuring fancy billboards. A lively flow of people filled the streets day and night, and the energetic appeals to potential customers never ceased.



It was just past two in the morning. In a backstreet with remarkably few people for Drestia, a young man was howling like a maniac and relentlessly kicking something on the ground.

“Ah-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Urgh...”

The ragged thing on the ground was a man who was once a skilled swordsman celebrated as the greatest practitioner of the Flower Garden School of Swordcraft, but he now responded to the kicking with little more than quiet moaning.

The young man’s superior called out to him, having finished his work in the area.

“Hey, rookie! That’s enough! We need to get out of here!”

The young man stopped his kicking and smiled.

“Ah-ha, sorry... I was having fun and got carried away...”

His apology was surprisingly genuine despite following such a terrible act of violence. Though he twisted his mouth into a euphoric grin, the black hood obscuring his eyes made it hard to tell exactly what kind of face he was making.

“Come on now!” his superior yelled.

Then together with ten companions all dressed completely in black, the young man jumped into a carriage that had been prepared beforehand. They were carrying wrapping cloths packed with an astounding amount of dazzling gold and silver treasure. These were grunts from the black-clad group known as the Black Organization, which had been wreaking havoc across society as of late.

After receiving orders from above, these grunts would set to work in the streets to take care of whatever their superiors needed, from silencing a target to plundering a location. They were as disposable as bullets to the organization as a whole.

Among this band, however, there was one special bullet that always returned to the gun.

“Ah-ha, what a nice night...”

It was the young man who had been taking pleasure in relentlessly kicking the unmoving body on the ground.

None of the other grunts knew where he came from. There was one thing they did know, though—he was fearfully strong. In the underground world, that was all that mattered. His might alone earned him a certain level of trust.

The young man produced a flower he’d picked before jumping into the carriage and began to tear off the petals one by one.

“He loves me, he loves me lots, he loves me, he loves me lots, he loves me... He loves me lots!”

He hugged himself with both arms and squirmed from happiness at the fortune the flower gave him.

A gust of wind knocked back his black hood. His trademark blue hair was tied in a ponytail, and the moonlight shimmering on his face illuminated a large scar left by a blade. If not for the old wound, he would have been quite handsome. His looks and lineage had once made him popular with the girls at the swordcraft academy he'd attended.

Placing the flower shorn of petals into his mouth, he lovingly traced the large scar on his face with a look of ecstasy.

“Ah-ha, I knew it! We have long been bound by the red thread of fate! Don't you agree...Allen?”

The young man's name was Dodriel Barton, the broken prodigy who had once lost a duel to Allen Rodol.

# Afterword

Hello, I am Syuichi Tsukishima.

Whether I see you online every day or this novel is our introduction to each other, I can't thank you enough for picking up the first volume of *100-Million-Year Button*!

The original work on the website Shousetsuka Ni Narou rocketed to the top of the yearly ranking, thanks to the support of an incredible number of readers.

It's hard to believe, but enough people to fill the Tokyo Dome showed up to read it *every single day*. Your support allowed the original work to receive this novelization. Thank you very much! The story will continue, so I hope you stick around.

This novel includes many revisions of the web-novel version and features newly written text. Additionally, some events were changed to make them more interesting. This version received quite the power-up.

I believe this is the greatest novel I've written in my career, and I would be happy if it brings even a little joy to readers. I hope you look forward to the second volume releasing on December 20, exactly two months after this one!

Now, I would like to give some thanks.

To Mokyū for your amazing illustrations, to the lead editor for teaching me a variety of things, to the proofreader for fixing typos, and to the great many people involved in the production of this book—thank you very much.

And a huge thanks to all the readers who purchased this book!

I hope we meet again in Volume 2. That is all from me.

*Syuichi Tsukishima*

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